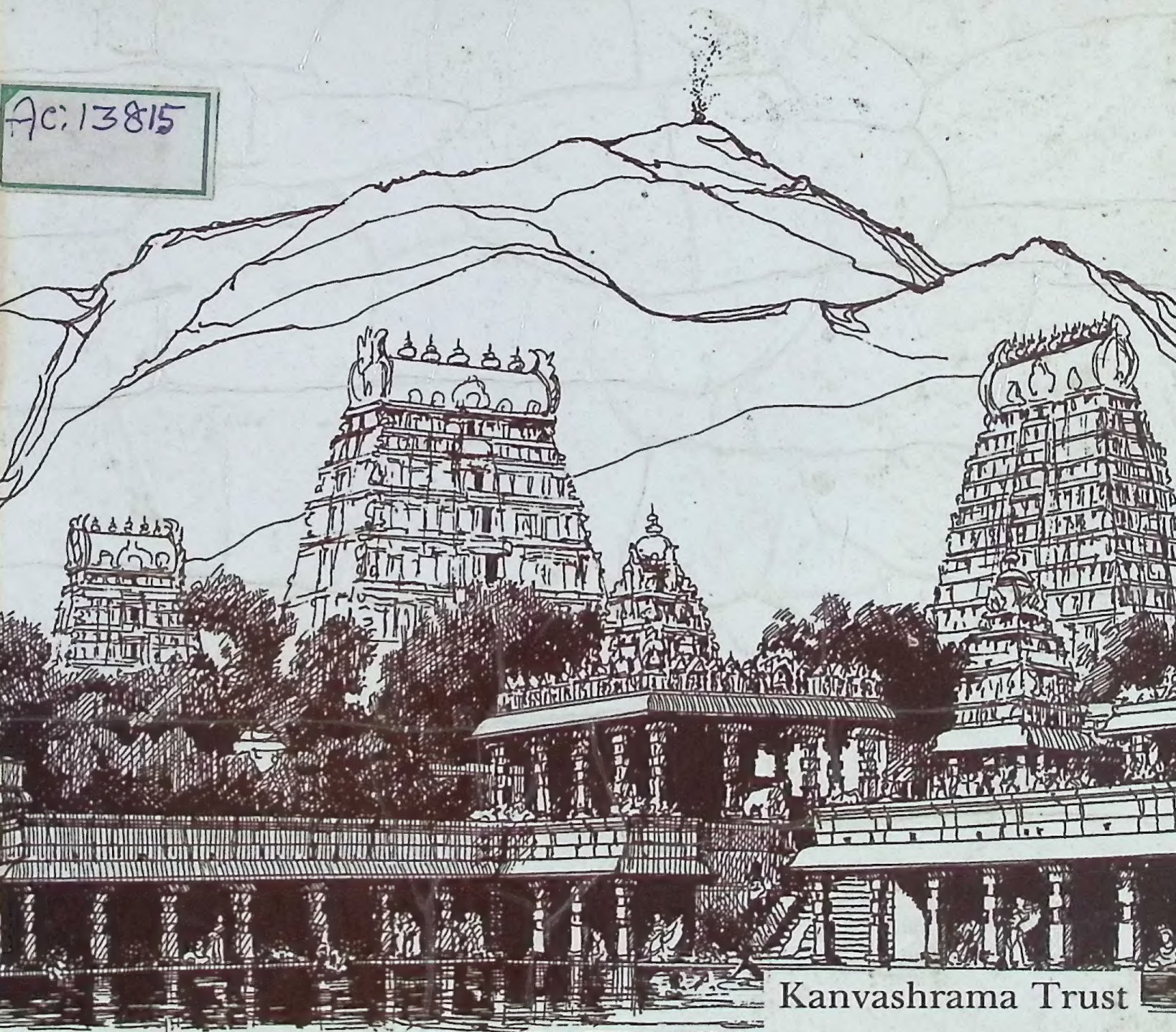


A PILGRIMAGE IN SOUTH INDIA IN 1845: TIRUVANNAMALAI

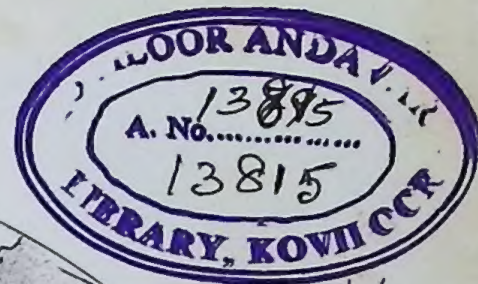
FRANÇOISE BOUDIGNON

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Kanvashrama Trust

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SRI RAMANA KSHETRA – KANVASHRAMA TRUST

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TIRUVANNAMALAI

Translated from the French by Else M. Van Den Muyzenberg
Edited by Nadhia Sutara
Foreword by David Godman

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Note from the Publisher

Tiruvannamalai . . . 1845 ?

In 1845, and who knows how many millenia before that, perhaps even before the dawn of Hinduism as we know it, Tiruvannamalai was, as it continues to be, an important place of pilgrimage. Indeed, according to those authoritative voices to which we listen in awe, the most important place.

One such authority is our own Sri Ramana Maharshi, whose physical presence manifested here to delight and enlighten us from 1879 to 1950, and, eternal as the Holy Mountain, continues to do so even today. It was He who, when exhorted to pay a visit to holy Mount Kailasa deep in the Himalayas, dismissed the idea lovingly but resolutely, explaining that while Kailasa was indeed the abode of Lord Siva, Holy Annamalai — Sri Arunachala — is Lord Siva Himself, from beginningless bottom to endless top, the One Limitless Self, a dense mass of *jnana*.

It is not surprising, then, that a devotee based at Kathmandu, leading regular pilgrimages to Mt. Kailasa, should feel the mighty pull of Sri Arunachala incomparably stronger than that of Lord Siva's abode. The pull became even more powerful when he was immobilised ("āchala"-ed) in hospital with a badly healing bone fracture that delayed his revisiting the South. When, in that sad state, he was unexpectedly visited by a friend from Tiruvannamalai, he burst into tears: "I so much want to be at Arunachala's Feet!" he cried. His visitor glanced up at the chart hanging over his bed and said simply, "You are on the right track, then. The number of your bed is 122 — the number of the bus from Madras to Tiruvannamalai . . ."

In *A Space Odyssey: 2001* the author speaks of the perfect Stone, one that teaches and elevates by its very presence, a Stargate, a warp in Time and Dimension. The odyssey culminates with the hero, David Bowman (a symbolic Sagittarius aiming at the Centre, the *Hridayam* or Heart of the Universe), falling through this Stone into an experience that is astoundingly reminiscent of that described as the plenum void, the spiritual black hole — *Brahman* of the Vedas — which for

us has assumed the name and form of Sri Arunachala-Ramana. . . . But let us never forget that whatever we may *think* of THAT is inevitably wrong because no thought can ever hope to approximate or formulate the Absolute.

1845, Mailam. Whatever happened to that little family described in this picture-book who made their pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain? As we drive through the small town of Mailam in 1994 (thank you, Skanda C. Rossi, for your unswerving assistance) to bring the galley proofs of this book to Messrs. All India Press at Pondicherry (thank you for your patience, Sri Saphal), we marvel at the changelessness of the landscape and the people who inhabit it. We are also going to visit Mrs. Françoise Boudignon, whose creation this beautiful book is (thank you, thank you, indeed). It was originally published in French by Messrs. Albin Michel, Paris (thank you, Sirs, for the generous conditions imposed upon us for obtaining the translation rights). The splendid translation you have before you was done by Else Van Den Muyzenburg (thank you truly, my dear Else) and carefully edited and corrected by Nadhia Sutara (thank you, Nadhia, for pressing on in the face of so many obstacles), with a foreward by the incomparable David Godman (thank you, thank you!). Finally, this work would never have seen the light but for the encouraging support of the management of Sri Ramanasramam (thank you, with obeisances, Abode of Sri Ramana!).

. . . And whatever happened to that little family from Mailam?

We cannot know much more about them than is recorded in this book. Nevertheless, in a roundabout way they have hinted at the Centre where we can certainly find out.

And now . . . let's go and get lost!

Hamsa J.J. de Reede, B.A.
President, Kanvashrama Trust
Mounalayam, Tiruvannamalai
Kartikai Deepam, 1994

Foreword

Tiruvannamalai, a medium-sized town in South India, has been attracting Hindu pilgrims in large numbers for hundreds of years. As long ago as the sixth century AD poets and Hindu holy men were singing songs in praise of it, extolling its greatness, its power and its sanctity.

The object of all this devotional fervour is and has been the local mountain — called Annamalai in Tamil and Arunachala in Sanskrit — and the temple dedicated to it on its eastern side. The image of God in the temple and the mountain which rises up behind it are held to be one and the same entity: Siva, the Supreme Deity for millions of Hindus.

The principal local myth, which will be retold later in the book, narrates the story of how Siva chose this place to manifest on earth and how, in fulfilment of a promise, He took the form of a mountain so that devotees down the centuries could have a tangible form to revere and worship. So, for the millions of pious Hindus who accept this story at face value, the mountain is not merely a place where God once appeared, or where He presides in a mysterious, invisible way, it is Siva Himself manifesting in a physical form, a form which bestows grace on all who approach it.

The story may seem quaint and unbelievable to western ears, but it cannot be lightly and laughingly dismissed. Mythology articulates in an anthropomorphic form the innermost spiritual feelings and experiences of a people. So, since Hindu mystics and even ordinary pilgrims have felt, directly and indubitably, the radiant spiritual power of the mountain, one can say that the local myths are merely an attempt to frame, in a conventional Hindu format, the genuine experiences of generations of devout visitors.

So how does a mountain come to be such a powerful place? There is no satisfactory 'scientific'

answer; one simply has to accept it as an inexplicable mystery.

Down the centuries a succession of Hindu saints has been drawn to the mountain. Through worshipping it they have experienced, in its presence, the grace of Siva, God Himself in a Hindu guise, and through its power they have attained spiritual liberation or union with the Divine. Not everyone, of course, has the inclination to be a saint or a mystic. For millions of ordinary Hindus Arunachala is the all-powerful God: one serves Him, prays to Him, worships Him, and takes one's troubles to Him, without bothering about the higher mystical states. The story that unfolds in this book tells of one such family of Hindus who revere Arunachala as the Supreme Lord who answers prayers and grants boons. As they make their pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai in 1845, in fulfilment of a vow to the mountain, we get an intriguing and fascinating glimpse into 19th century Hindu India.

The festival they attend in Tiruvannamalai is still celebrated in much the same way that it was in 1845. Nowadays about 250,000 pilgrims participate in the climactic final day of the festival: some go to the top of the hill to witness the lighting of the sacred beacon; others watch it from the main temple or from the many vantage points around the mountain. Almost all of them will perform the ritual barefoot walk around the mountain, a distance of thirteen kilometres, on the final morning of the celebrations. Whether one is a Hindu or not, it is still an awe-inspiring sight to watch this vast flowing river of humanity wend its way around the mountain in a pious act of reverence and homage to God.

David Godman,
Arunachala, 8.4.92

*"Honour to Ganesh!
God with the elephant head,
Lord of all beginnings,
He who removes obstacles."*



SOUTH INDIA, IN THE LAND OF THE TAMILS

A book about India, however modest it may be, could not begin without paying homage to Ganesh. Especially when it deals with South India, where he is particularly venerated and where one always invokes him before undertaking any new enterprise.

From antiquity up till the present day Indian civilization and what is nowadays called 'the Hindu religion' have been one and the same reality. Ways of living, beliefs and the practices connected with them form a tradition that still rules the daily life of the Tamils (there are very few Muslims and Christians in this part of India).

Temples are of major importance to most Hindus, for they are not only centres of religious activity, they also serve as the focus for the cultural and social activities of the town which encompasses them and the villages which surround them. The influence of certain big temples extends far beyond their own locality, making them exceptional centres of attraction.

Pilgrimages and temple festivals represent a 'special time', an interlude which gathers and mixes all categories of the population that are normally extremely compartmentalized in Indian society.

For us it is an occasion to go from the village to the town, from our home to the temple, and to mingle with many people.

The history, art, literature and language of the Tamil land (today the State of Tamil Nadu) are among the richest of all the regions of India. As it was very little affected by the Muslim rule, this southern extremity of the Indian peninsula gives a picture of the original Hindu tradition. In spite of foreign intervention, this civilization is still very much alive even today.

In 1845, after a century of battles, Britain was in control of virtually all of India. The British influence however had not penetrated traditional life. Indian society was still structured by castes, which were primarily graded by their degree of ritual purity. Abstinence from meat and alcohol, along with daily practices connected with ritual cleanliness, marked out the purest. Power and wealth — at least theoretically speaking — were of secondary importance in relation to cleanliness.

For some considerable time, I have been living in the Tamil land for several months each year. These visits inspired the idea of this book. I have been able to write it locally, in an atmosphere that has, in many respects, changed little or not at all since 1845, and I have had abundant documentation at my disposal.

But, in all fairness, this book should have borne the title: 'Tiruvannamalai Junior'. That is how it was named, with much fondness, at its very beginning, by a group of researchers at the French College of Far Eastern Studies and the College for Higher Studies in Social Sciences who have made an on the spot study of the temple and the town. Their research consisted of historical, geographical, epigraphic, archaeological, architectural and anthropological analyses that were organized, compared and finally collated to form an important work which is in the process of being published. The authors are Jean Deloche, Françoise L'Hernault, Pierre Pichard and Marie-Louise Reiniche. They are also, together with Madeleine Biardeau, head of the Practical College for Higher Studies, the generous and attentive patrons of this 'pilgrimage', having followed it through all its stages.

In the Land of the Tamils

Saturday, the 29th of November, 1845, in South India. A hundred and fifty kilometres from Madras, at the foot of a small isolated hill topped by a temple, a village called Mailam has been built. It is completely surrounded by regularly-irrigated rice paddies and fields of millet, peanuts and legumes. In this bare and rather arid landscape of the plains, the village is sheltered from the tropical heat by large trees: neems, mangoes, tamarinds, pipals and banyans, as well as coconut palms.

The houses are low and have walls of ochre mud that are occasionally whitewashed. The roofs of the wealthiest dwellings are covered with layers of grass. Those of the more modest houses are made of woven palm-leaf panels. The palm-leaf huts are the dwellings of the poor. In each house and on each threshold, a floor of hard-packed soil is neatly swept and regularly washed with a mixture of cow dung and water.

Every morning, once the housework is done, the women draw patterns, called *kolams*, on the still-moist soil in front of their doors. With white powder, either rice flour or lime powder, they first lay out a regular pattern of dots. Then, by letting the powder run smoothly and steadily between their thumb and forefinger, they compose a continuous line which turns and twists around the initial dots, following a pattern which they know by heart. Each type of design has a name and a symbolic meaning. These *kolams*, which are wiped out during the day by the frequent footsteps which cross them, are remade each morning. They vary from day to day, being large and magnificent on festival days.

The majority of the inhabitants of Mailam are farmers. There are some craftsmen — a potter, a coppersmith, a weaver — and a few small shopkeepers along the street that runs on to the highway. The **Brahmin** priests of the temple and their families live in a separate quarter. Finally, packed together and isolated from the village,





there are some huts located near a well that is reserved for them. These give shelter to a portion of Hindu society called '**untouchables**'. (Many years later **Mahatma Gandhi** was to call them Harijans, 'children of God', in an effort to alleviate their social status.)

The Assembly in the Square

The village is run by a village assembly, the *Panchayat*, in which the heads of all the families participate. The meetings are announced by the village crier and are held in the main square. The debates make good progress in the shade of the venerated tree, a giant **pipal**. Is the wisdom contained in the discussions and judgments due to the presence of Ganesh, the elephant-headed god? Maybe so . . . As in most villages, he sits in a small open-air **shrine** at the foot of the pipal tree.



At the Well

The women do not attend the assembly. But while the men are palavering, they meet around the well. While waiting their turn to draw water, they too are fascinated by the topic of the day, and their discussions are just as lively as those of the wise men . . . Once their big earthen or copper pots are filled, they balance them on their heads with the aid of a towel rolled up into a small circle, and leave in small groups. The conversations continue and are punctuated with shouting, laughing and cries of 'ah-yo!'. Amidst the grey and ochre landscape, the saris, those long seamless fabrics in which the women are draped, are patches of colour that stand out against the dark-brown skin of the Tamils.

On this particular evening Selvi has not lingered at the well. She is waiting instead, full of impatience, for her father-in-law and her husband to come home from the assembly. The whole family is going on a pilgrimage and they have not yet finished their preparations.

Selvi's Vow



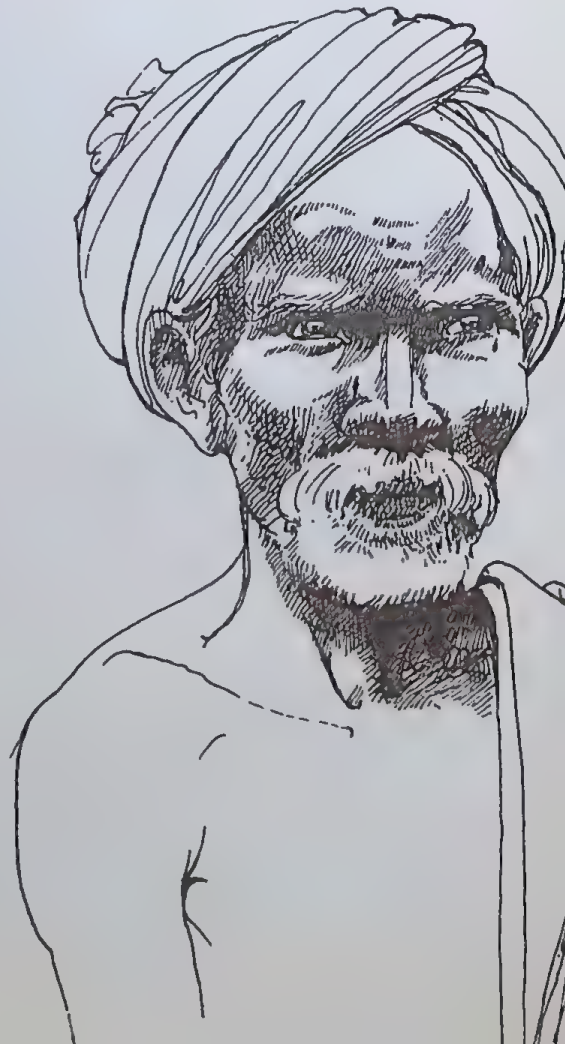
Selvi and Madhavan have a daughter who is already seven years old. Her name is Shanti. For a long time Selvi had also desired to have a boy. To enable this wish to be fulfilled she had, in accordance with custom, hung a small wooden cradle containing terra cotta figurines on the pipal tree in the village square. She had then taken a vow, promising that after the birth she was hoping for she would undertake a pilgrimage to the great temple of Tiruvannamalai for the **Kartikai Deepam Festival**.

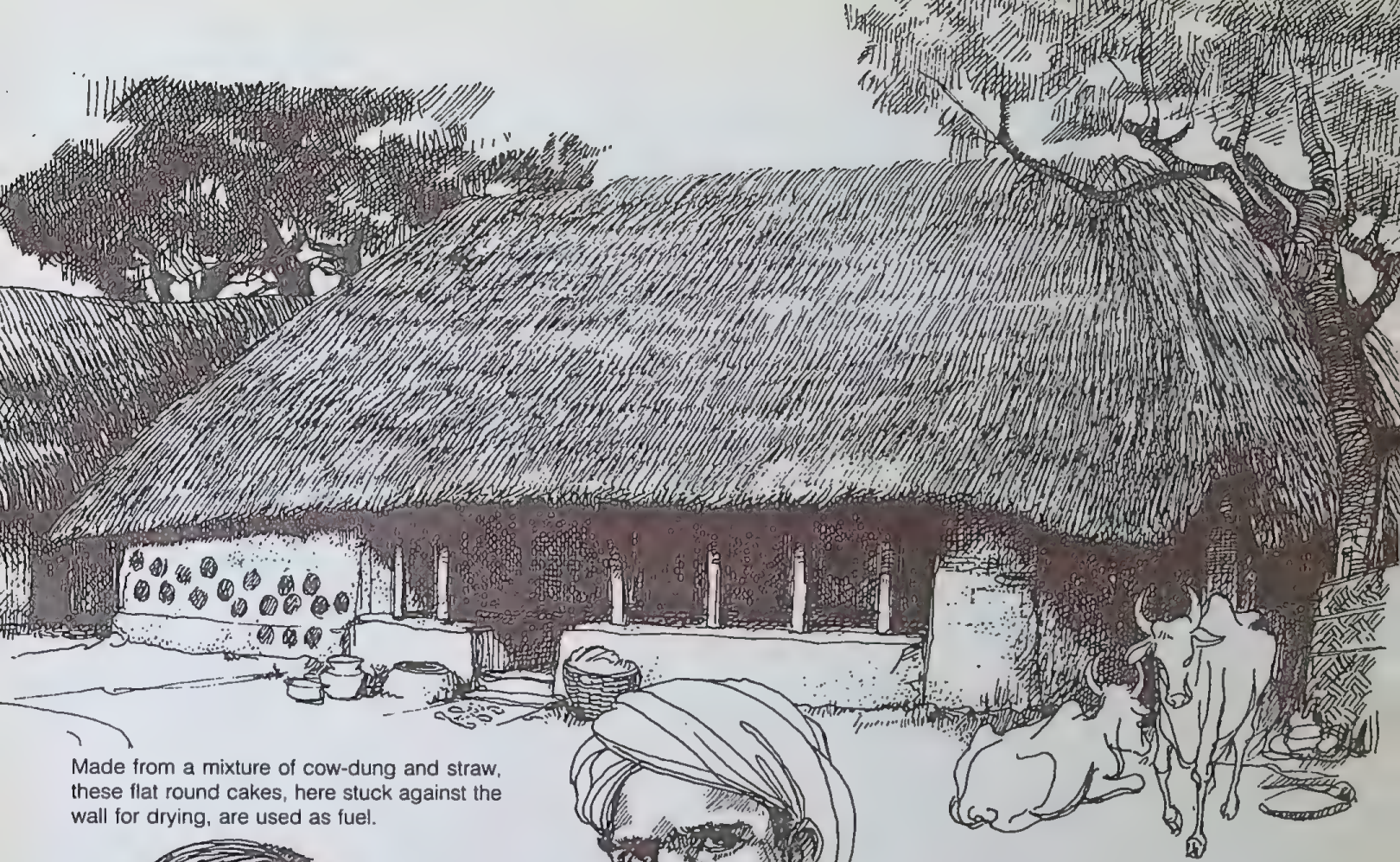
Little Mani was born almost a year ago. In order to keep the promise that was made to the gods, the family's departure will take place tomorrow. Tonight, Kumaran and Sarasvati, Madhavan's father and mother, were, together with all the family, on the look-out for the return of Selvi's brother and his wife, for, in accordance with the local custom, the maternal uncle always presides over ceremonies involving his nephews.

The Family and their Home

Following local tradition, Selvi has, since her wedding, lived with her mother- and father-in-law, her husband's brother and his younger sister. Though they are modest farmers, they do own their land. Their house, which is one of the largest in the village, looks out over a small square near the village well. The thatched roof is made of **vetiver**. This plant, harvested on the banks of ponds, is tied onto a frame in regular layers that are carefully pressed together to form a completely waterproof covering. The thick walls, made of big unbaked mudbricks, are white-washed.

The access to the common room inside is through a door on the raised veranda, where the family spends most of its time. A smaller, windowless room serves as a storage space for the family's precious possessions and its grain and spice reserves. Outside, the bullocks are sheltered by an overhanging section of the roof.



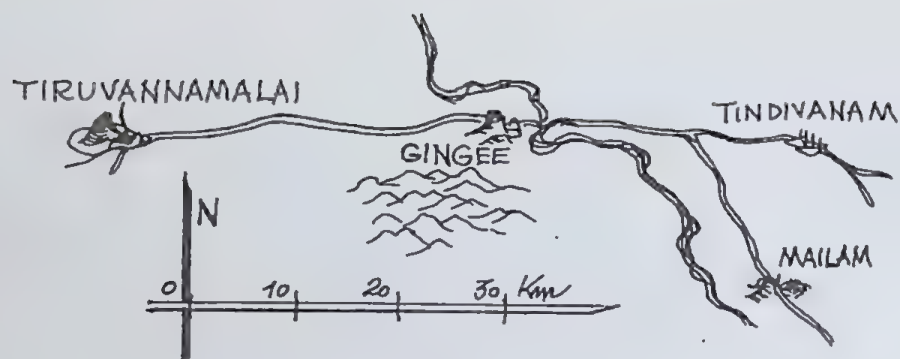


Made from a mixture of cow-dung and straw, these flat round cakes, here stuck against the wall for drying, are used as fuel.





Ganesh receives offerings of flowers, coconuts, bananas and **betel**. The rat, which he uses as his mount, is shown in a reclining position in front of him.



Itinerary of the pilgrimage:

First stage: Mailam-Gingee—34 kms

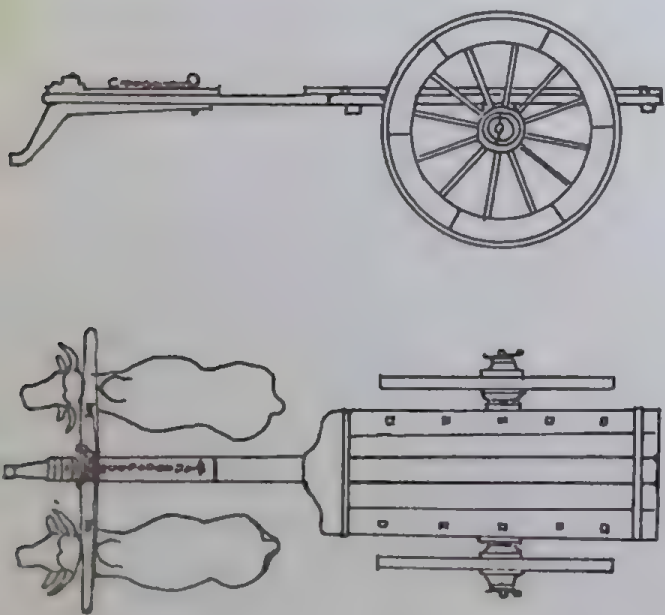
Second stage: Gingee-Tiruvannamalai—38 kms

The Departure

Sunday, 30th November, 1845.

The whole family has ritually honoured Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, 'He who removes obstacles,' with offerings and prayers. Ganesh is always invoked at the beginning of any new undertaking.

Since the **monsoon** will soon be over, it may not rain today. And because it is the cool season it will be hardly more than 30°C in the shade on the road. The family has to prepare supplies of rice, vegetables and spices and bring their large cooking vessels and mats for sleeping. Clothes are also needed: for the men, 'vestis', long lengths of cotton cloth edged with a coloured border; for the women, brightly coloured saris and 'cholis', short tightly-fitting blouses which they only wear on festival days. For toiletry, they will not forget to bring small boxes of **sandal** and saffron paste for freshening up the body and the face, and 'kumkum', a red powder with which they mark their foreheads. The women also smear it on the centre parting of their hair.



The Tamil cart is very elegant. Each of its big wheels has twelve spokes (average diameter: 1.50m).

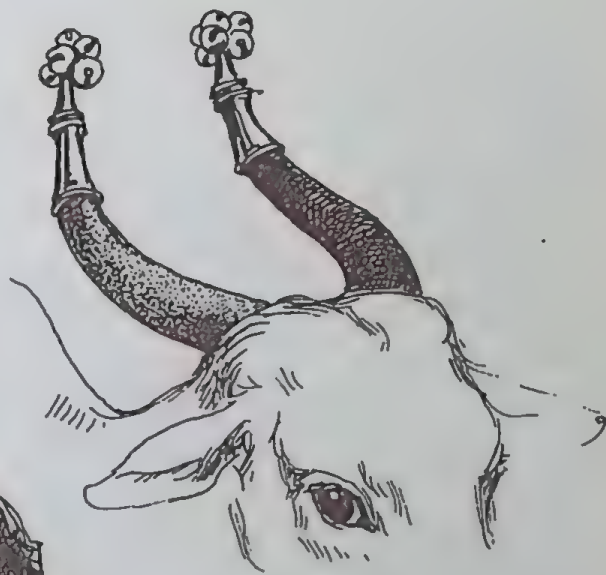
Wagon: 2.20m long and 0.84 m wide.

Shaft: 1.60m long.

Yoke: 1.85m long

They have put slatted sides on top of the cart, and there is a woven mat tied to the bamboo hoops to protect the travellers from the sun. The cart floor is covered with fresh straw: this will absorb the bumps on the road, which has been furrowed during the recent rains. The bullocks have bells attached to the tips of the copper cones which cover the ends of their horns. When they drive off the flies with an abrupt movement of the head, they make the bells tinkle. One horn is red, the other is green: the colour is a little faded because they were last painted in mid-January, prior to the **Pongal** Festival. The painting is an annual rite.

Six o'clock in the morning. The cool air is already fragrant with the scent of the jasmine garlands with which the women decorate their hair. It is time to leave because they must reach the evening stopping place before it gets dark. The big wheels creak a little as the cart moves off. The driver sits on the end of the shaft and holds the tail of the right-hand animal between his toes. He regulates the pace of the bullocks by squeezing it.



A different colour for each horn:
for instance, blue and yellow,
or green and red.





Transplanting rice



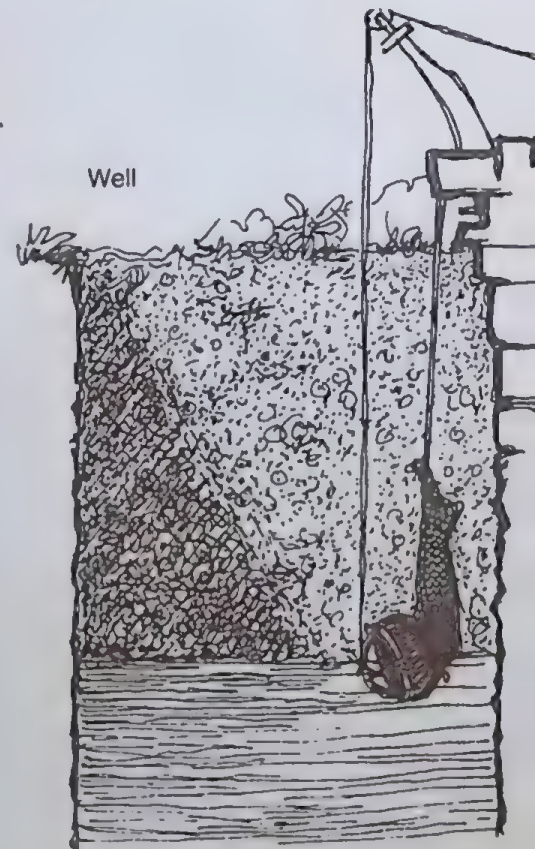
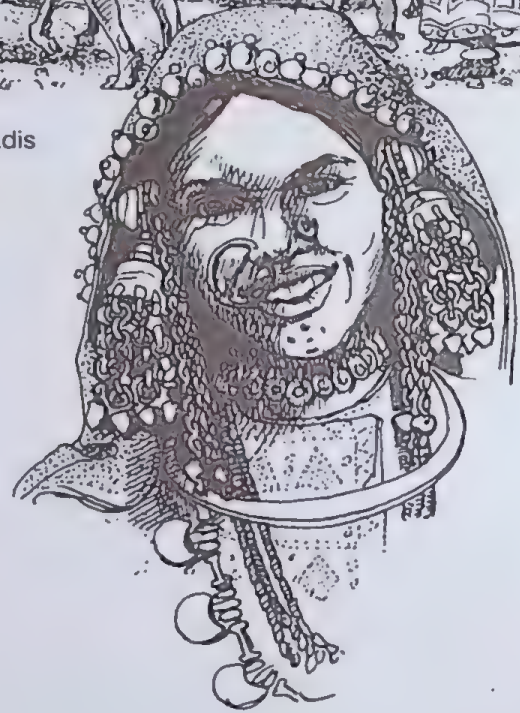
Caravan of Lambadis

The Road

In the Land of the Tamils, the road network has remained the same throughout history because it links up the big pilgrimage towns like Kanchipuram, Tiruvannamalai, Chidambaram, Tiruchirapalli, Madurai and Rameshwaram.

The road, made of soil, sand, gravel and packed pebbles, is cambered like a tortoise's back to facilitate the drainage of water towards the small ditches on either side. In the dry season, the carts raise clouds of dust. During heavy rainfalls big puddles appear. At these times the wheels make deep, muddy ruts that will have to be filled in later on. Most of the time these repairs are carried out by the farmers who live alongside the road.

The presence of enormous trees, such as banyans, mangoes and tamarinds, creates a regular strip of shade which travellers like to use for sitting or resting. The rice-fields and the lands that adjoin them are, here and there, scattered with palmyras or 'sugar palms', which have tall bare trunks that are crowned with a tuft of straight palm leaves. Coconut palms and banana trees are clustered near the hamlets. The road is very lively: farmers' and travellers' carts passing herds of cows and goats moving in the opposite direction; porters covering up to twenty kilometres a day with twenty to thirty kilogram loads on their heads; 'Lambadis', the gypsies of India, their caravan of bullocks transporting salt from the coast to the interior.



Well



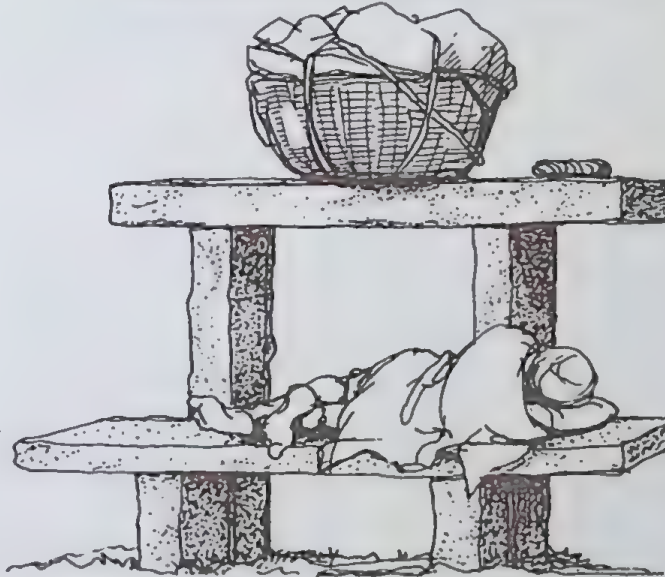
Porter

Split-level stone resting place on the bank of a water tank

Banyan

This climber will collect the juice of the sugar palm by making an incision in the shoots that grow at the base of the palm fronds.

Some people say that these stone benches, erected for the convenience of porters who carry heavy head-loads, were built at the entrance of villages after the death of a pregnant woman so that she could free herself from her burden.



Irrigation system:

A long leather bag, the 'tail', is attached to the opening in the bottom of a copper pot. The two ropes connecting the handle and the tail operate separately and are attached to the

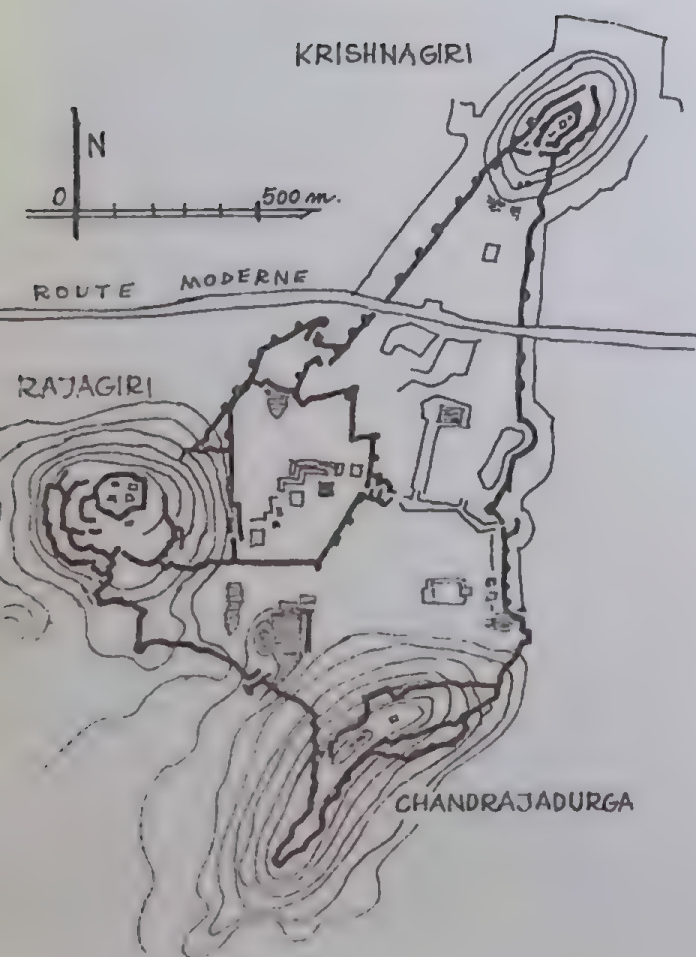
yoke of the bullocks. When the bullocks are at the top of the slope, the pot is tipped over, filled and straightened up again. As the pot is raised, the tail is kept in an upward position by the lower rope. In order to raise the pot of water, the bullocks are sent down the slope at a brisk pace by the driver who jumps on the rope to tighten it. The tail automatically swings across and the water flows into the irrigation channel.





Gingee, An Ancient Fortified Town

Before reaching the fortress, we somehow manage to ford the Gingee River. To our left and right launderers and laundresses are busy, vigorously beating clothes on large flat rocks. The huge bundles of linen are carried by small beige donkeys. These animals are only used by the launderer caste. For, despite their strength and resilience, their connection with dirty laundry causes the animals to be considered impure.

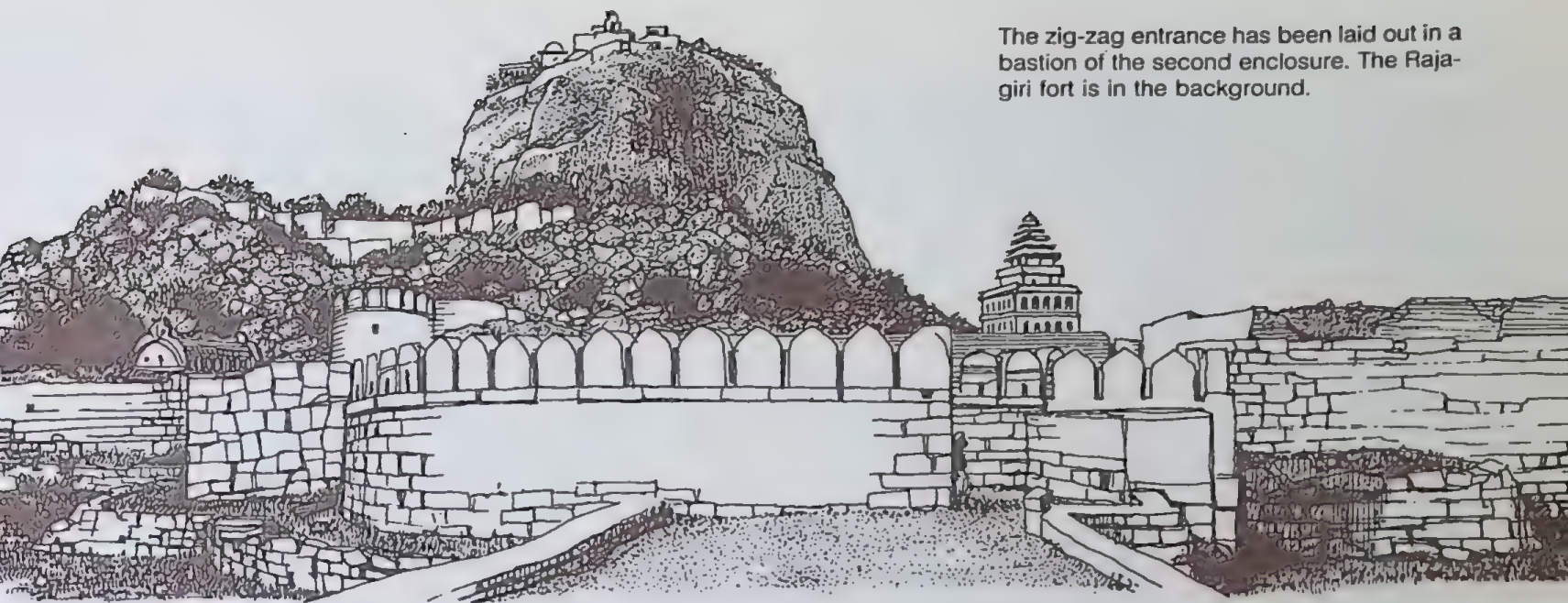


The Fortress

When we come to the river, the flat landscape of rice-fields begins to be punctuated by rocky hills that have an air of the fantastic about them. Huge round boulders, polished and worn by the elements, are lying around in heaps as though they have been piled up by a giant who has prepared them as ammunition for his sling.

Two kilometres further away from the river, we find ramparts linking up three of these hills along whose slopes they climb, merging sometimes with the vertical sides of the hills: this is the first enclosure of the Gingee fortress. The second one hems in the foot of the highest hill, Rajagiri (216 m). The citadel on the summit is defended by several interior walls leading up into the rocks. Each of the two other hills is also crowned by a fort.

The history of this magnificent fortified town is a long and turbulent one



The zig-zag entrance has been laid out in a bastion of the second enclosure. The Rajagiri fort is in the background.

Steps built in the rock.

Successive Regimes

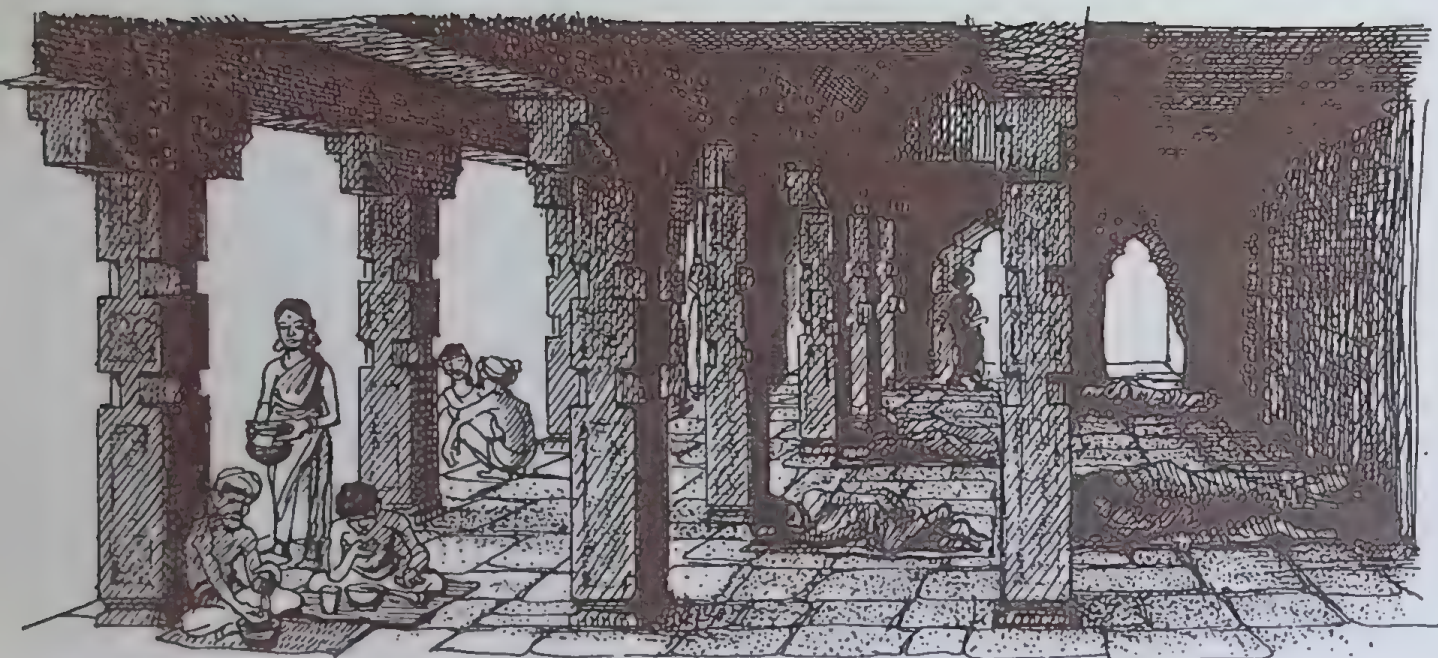
The Gingee site was fortified in the 11th century by the **Chola** kings. Over the succeeding centuries the citadel was enlarged by **Hindu** kings and became a fortress that was reputed to be impregnable. However, it fell into the hands of the Muslims in 1658, was regained by the Hindus in 1677 and eventually fell again to the Muslims in 1698.

In the 18th century, there was a French settlement called Pondicherry on the south-eastern coast of India. After working in Pondicherry for the French Indian Company for twenty years, Dupleix became governor of the town in 1741. He then fought against the British, who wanted to conquer South India, and managed to expand French possessions through diplomatic and military operations. He decided to attempt a daring raid on Gingee (60 kms from Pondicherry). During the night of 11th to 12th September, 1752, a small army under the command of the Marquis de Bussy captured the fortress in a lightning raid against the Muslims who were entrenched there. The French kept it until 1761, when it fell into the hands of the British. Today, in 1845, the citadel is disused, having been abandoned by the British for almost forty years. Travellers do not venture to go there during the night. It is actually said that the place is haunted . . .



A bamboo bridge above the last ravine defends the Rajagiri fort.





When one eats, a small ball of rice and sauce mixed with vegetables is rolled together by hand, always the right hand. It is then picked up and pushed into the mouth with the thumb. The hands are thoroughly washed both before and after the meal.

At sleeping time one lies on a mat or a simple piece of cloth, preferably with one's head towards the North.



At the Stopping Place

Madhavan has gone past the disquieting fortress and feels relieved. He is now steering the cart towards a group of trees shading a small building near a large tank.

The Stop-Over Shelters or 'Chattrams'

Along the roads that are regularly used by pilgrims there are many stop-over shelters where one can take a rest, prepare one's meal and spend the night. They vary a lot from one place to another: from the most simple palm-leaf shelter to impressive buildings with spacious central courts onto which cells, even apartments, open out. In these, different family groups can have separate accommodation. The numerous shelters in the Tiruvannamalai region are mostly rectangular brick and stone constructions. These are only closed on three sides so that the facade remains open. The flat or arched roof is supported by rows of pillars and the raised floor is paved with stones.

In the Tamil region, these chattrams, which are so convenient for pilgrims, owe their existence to pious donations from big landowners or wealthy merchants. Some are open to everyone, others are reserved for one single caste.

Water

The chattram is always built near a 'kulam', a big water tank. One gains access to these tanks via stone steps leading down into the water. On one side is a ramp paved with stones, enabling animals to go and drink. The god Ganesh, who is always represented at these places, watches over the spot from under a pipal tree or in a small shrine.

In the tropics, since water is of cardinal importance, these tanks are busy and much frequented centres. Some of them are sacred and many have their legends. In these places the **ablutions** and bathing always take on a religious character.

The women always remain dressed while washing themselves. Their sari, which they tie at one end under the armpit, is also washed while they take a bath. Holding the other end and letting it flap in the wind enables the sari to dry within a few minutes. To clean one's teeth one scrubs them for several minutes with a brush made of a small neem twig.



Thirty-Eight Kilometres to Go

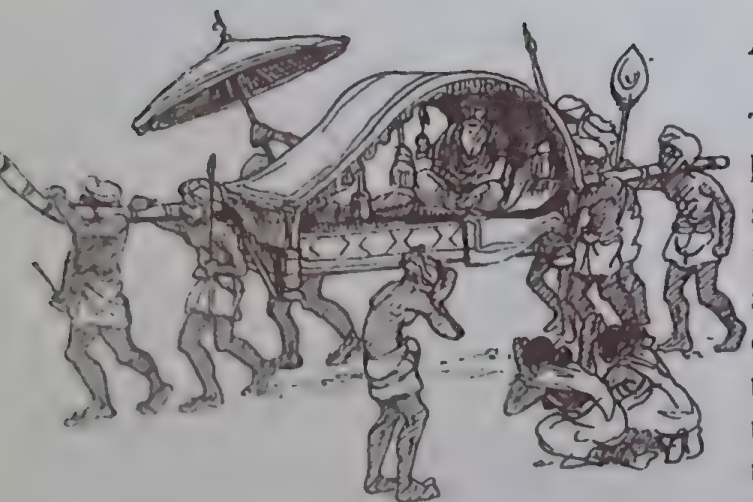
At dawn a small caravan of pilgrims is setting out. From the opposite direction a group, shouting out loudly, forces its way through a herd of black goats . . . Among them are men carrying a parasol, spears and emblems. A palanquin, covered with velour and fringed with long pompoms, is moving forward, jolting to the rhythm of the dancing steps of the porters. A venerable person, a 'swami', is sitting inside. Everybody prostrates before the religious leader and spiritual master by bowing low with their hands joined together in front of their foreheads.

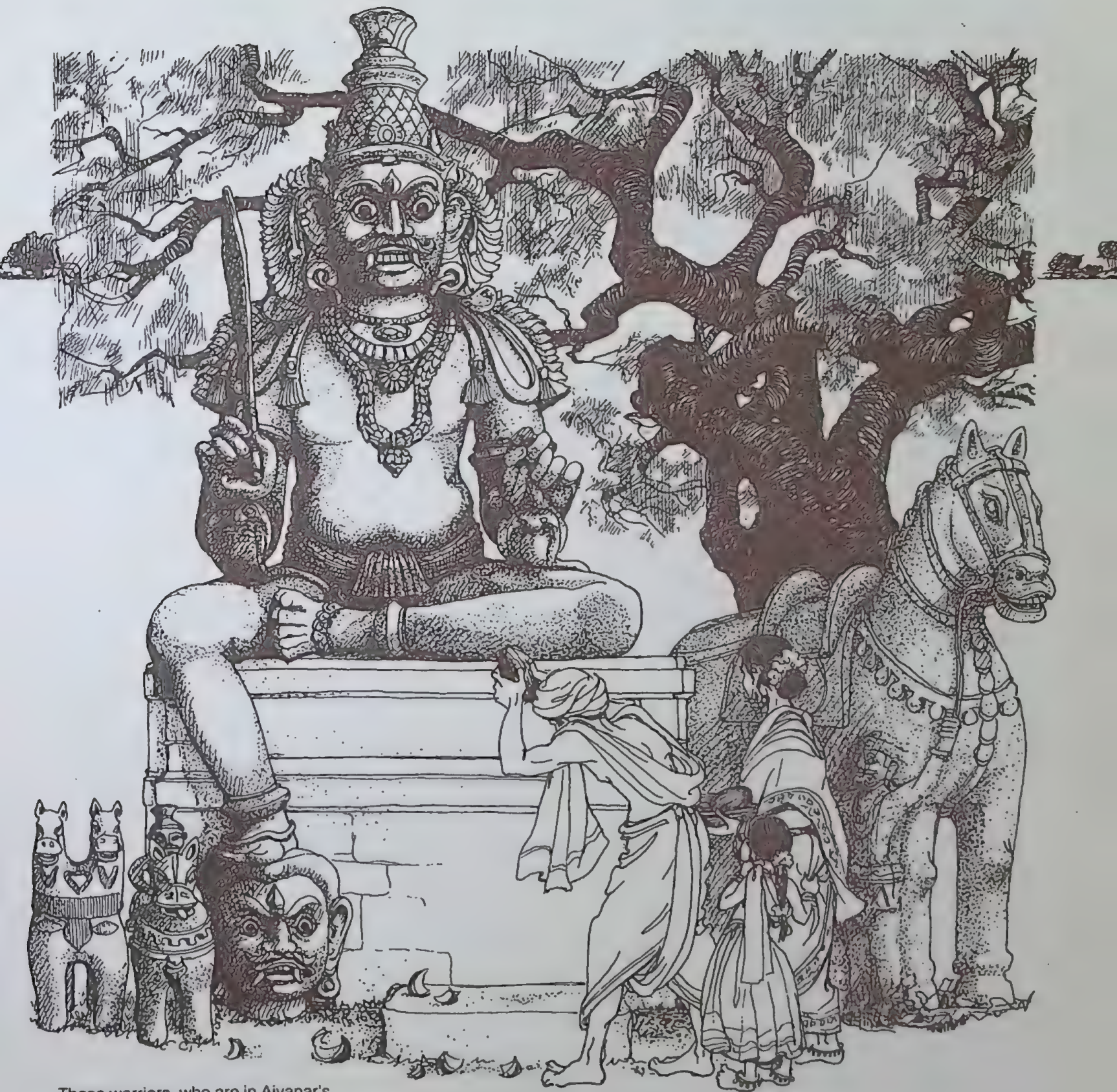
A Patron God of the Villages

At the junction of a road which leads to a hamlet stands the statue of a giant warrior, looking quite ferocious. A little to the left and set back from it, one sees, in the shade of large tamarind trees, a shrine dedicated to Aiyanar, the hunter god who resides in the surroundings of villages and who protects them. People say that during the night he rides on horseback with his soldiers to chase away evil demons from his territory. Between the impressive statue and the shrine are rows of horses of various sizes, either made of terra cotta or of coated and painted bricks. They are the mounts Aiyanar uses for his nocturnal outings. They were given to him as an offering by his devotees.

A Multi-Purpose Tree

The tamarind trees, with their finely serrated leaves and long reddish pods, do not only bring shade. Their fruit is an important source of prosperity: condiments, an astringent medicine and a corrosive chemical for cleaning copper objects are all obtained from it. The tamarind trees that the British government plants along the roads are rented out to farmers who utilize them. The considerable amount of money that the government receives then serves to pay roadmen for maintenance work.





These warriors, who are in Aiyanar's service, are minor patron deities who may be both fearsome and beneficent. They inspire both fear and respect and passers-by never forget to pay them homage by breaking a coconut at their feet.



The compartment of this palanquin was designed for the comfort of Europeans. The support, though, is Indian: no shafts, only the one single strong bamboo pole to which the porters are accustomed.

A Busy Road



A courier

The crowd is becoming ever more dense. The pilgrims are now moving forward on foot or in carts in tightly-packed groups. But what a racket! We hear the sound of bells, the creaking of wheels, the nasal singing of drivers. What voices! Tamil is a sonorous language whose sounds roll and carry long distances.

The movement of the crowd suddenly slows down considerably: two 'European style' **palanquins** are blocked by a collision between three carts. Under the indifferent and somewhat mocking eyes of the porters, who are happy with this unexpected rest, two representatives of the British East India Company are getting annoyed. They fulminate against this crowd whom they do not understand.

The Post

The crowd will only draw aside to let a courier through, for nothing should hold up his regular run. The long stick which he leans on helps to maintain his pace. A small bell, swinging to the rhythm of his long strides, announces his arrival.



Letters and postal parcels are sent in this way, using professional couriers. At the post houses, the bundle is rapidly handed over to the next courier who is ready to leave as soon as he hears the sound of the bell coming closer. The distance between the postal stations varies from nine to seventeen kilometres. If they are well-trained couriers, they can keep up an average of 230 kilometres every 24 hours.

A Holy Man

Close to Madhavan's family, a sadhu is walking along, carrying a trident, one of the accoutrements of the God Shiva. He is an **ascetic**: he has renounced all mundane activities and relationships and goes barefooted from one holy place to another, living on **alms**. Little Shanti is filled with respect when he speaks to her: "Far away, over there, you see the hill of Tiruvannamalai and at its foot the tall entrance **gopurams** of the temple. This mountain is none other than Siva Himself. Listen to its history . . .



A sadhu

The Myth of the Mountain...

"This extraordinary story comes to us from very remote times . . .

A long, a very long time ago, Brahma, the Creator, and Vishnu, the Preserver of the worlds, were quarreling. Each of them claimed to be the more powerful one. This argument went on for thousands of years. Then, when they started fighting, the sage Narada appeared to them and tried to calm them down. He explained to them that neither of them was the Supreme Divinity. But they would not listen to him and relentlessly went on fighting.

Shiva, the God with three eyes, decided to show them the truth at last. Taking on the form of an immense column of fire, He placed Himself between the two opponents. Suddenly, a voice burst forth from this dazzling light. And thus spoke Shiva: 'He among you two who will first find the top or the bottom of this effulgence will be regarded as the more powerful one.' Brahma then took the form of a swan and flew up into the sky. Vishnu changed himself into a boar and began digging into the ground in order to reach the nether worlds. Brahma kept flying for thousands of years without reaching the top. And for thousands of years Vishnu was digging in the earth without finding the bottom. Each of them then understood that Shiva, 'He who is limitless, without beginning nor end,' was superior to both of them. They came back to Earth, their arrogance gone. They bowed before the effulgent column of light, paying homage to 'Him without whose power neither creation nor preservation can take place' and begged Him to remain eternally present on the site of the column of fire. Shiva agreed. Out of mercy for devotees who could not bear the ineffable brilliance, Shiva transformed Himself into a mountain. Since then, every year, on the tenth day of the Kartikai Festival, the column of fire comes to life again."

This 12th century sculpture is in the temple of Darasuram (Chola Era).





...and its Representations

In the temples dedicated to Shiva, there is a sculpture of this God in a niche in the western facade. This particular image of Shiva, called 'Lingodbhava', recalls the legend of the mountain.

The styles vary from one era to another, but the representation always comprises the same elements: Shiva in an upright position in the oval opening of a column, which may be decorated in different ways; Vishnu at the bottom, with a boar's head, and Brahma at the top, with the features of a big bird.

The wood engraving reproduced here simultaneously tells the myth of the mountain and the ceremony of the tenth day of the Kartikai Festival. First of all we see Shiva in the column of fire, below Him Vishnu as a boar and above Him Brahma as a bird. On the left side of the column we see Brahma. Vishnu is on the right. Both are paying homage to Shiva. Above Shiva's head, the column of fire has become the mountain of Tiruvannamalai, at the foot of which a temple with many courtyards has been built. And lastly, we see the flame of the Kartikai Deepam Festival being lit on the top of the hill.

Wood engraving taken from a 19th century Tamil book, showing the various myths attributed to the town of Tiruvannamalai.

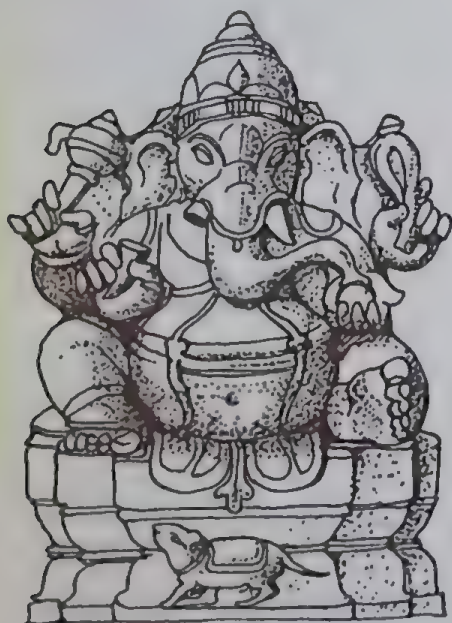


Sarasvati, Goddess of learning and music; Brahma's consort.



Brahma

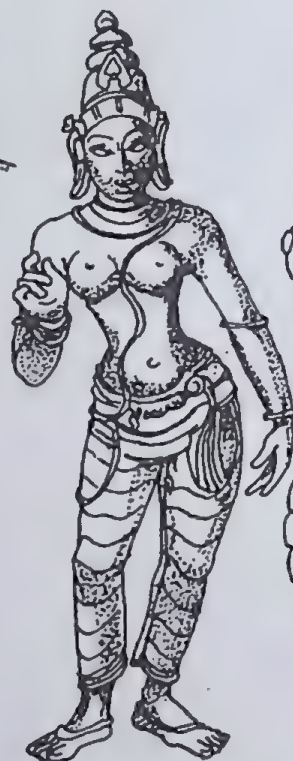
Subrahmanya, son of Shiva and Parvati.



Ganesh, 'He who removes obstacles'; son of Shiva and Parvati.



Dancing Shiva: Nataraja.



Parvati, beneficent form of the Goddess; Shiva's consort.



Vishnu, lying on the serpent Ananta during His cosmic sleep.



Lakshmi, Goddess of prosperity; Vishnu's consort.

The Hindu trinity consists of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma represents the process of creation; that is to say, he brings order to a universe which began with primordial chaos. Vishnu symbolizes the agency which preserves the universe. Shiva represents the force which destroys the universe when it decays, and which consequently renews it. Hindus are divided into **Shaivas** and **Valshnavas**, depending on which aspect of God they accord pre-eminence to. Brahma is not traditionally worshipped.

Durga, one of the militant and fearsome forms of the Goddess.



Krishna, one of the 'avatars' (incarnations on earth) of Vishnu.

An Ancient Religion

Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, Ganesh, Durga . . . To Westerners these names may evoke the superb images, created throughout the ages by **Indian** artists, of the legions of godly actors in fantastic legends.

To Hindus, that is to say 80% of the present Indian population, these deities preside over the organization of the universe in which the divine world and the terrestrial world communicate with each other. Vishnu and Shiva bring salvation on earth and in the worlds beyond. But they are themselves linked with a much vaster whole, the Cosmic Order. This Order, called Dharma, is the Law that brings the universe into existence, makes it disappear and which gives rhythm to the time of the worlds. It is also the Law that governs human society, the duties proper to each caste and stage of life, and the rebirths of each individual according to his deeds. Man is actually made up of a perishable body and an eternal, indestructible component that enters a new body when the previous one dies. This component is a minute part of an indivisible Whole.

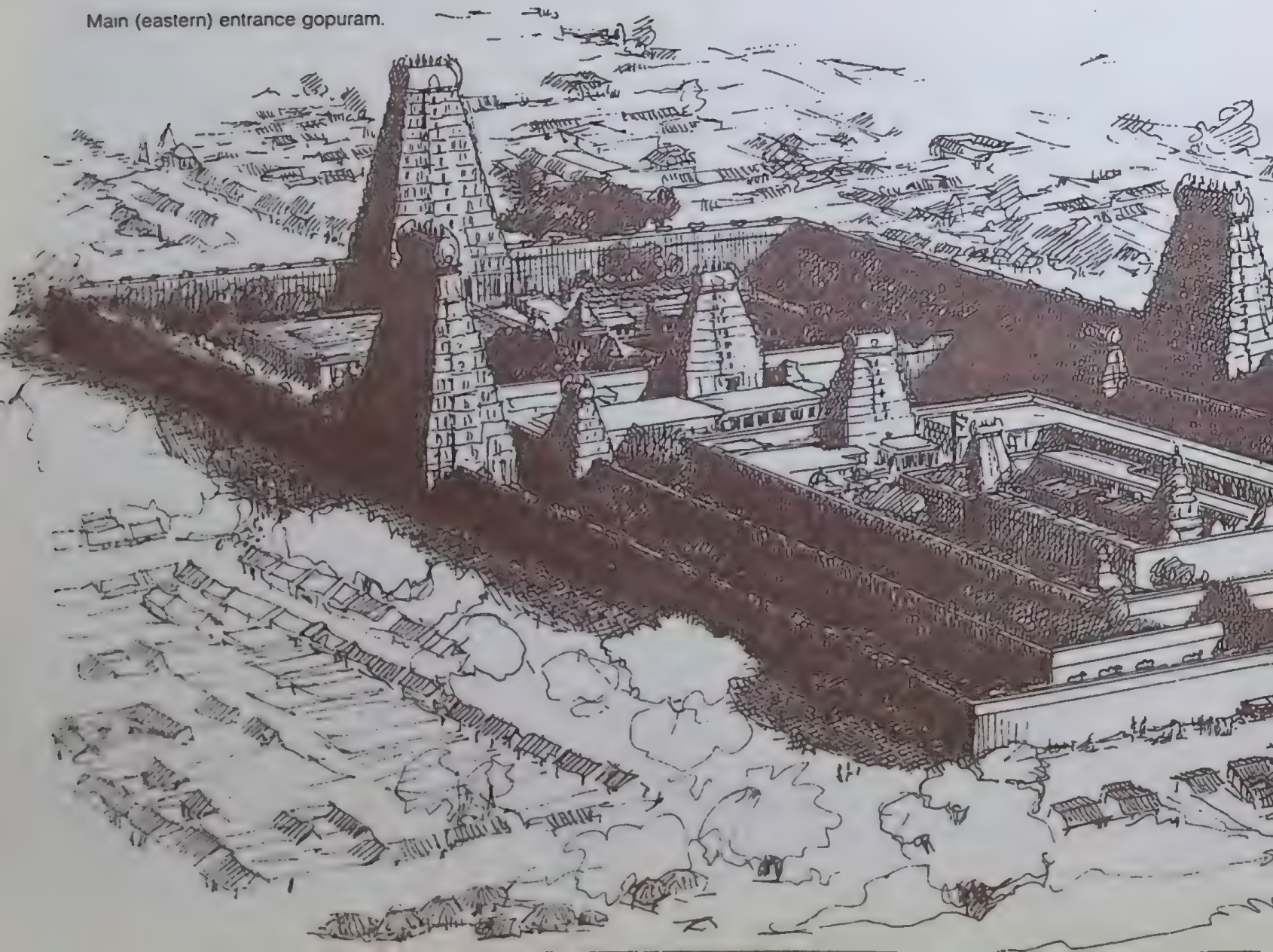
For a Hindu, birth and subsequent life within a certain caste are a consequence of the actions he has performed during his previous lives. That is what is called 'Karma'. In the same way, the actions he will perform in his present life, good or bad ones, in harmony or not with the Order, will determine his future births. He alone escapes from this who attains to final salvation, a state which liberates him from the obligation to be reborn in this earthly world.

Within this structure, the gods each have a different function. Depending on the functions they fulfil, each of them can take on different aspects and names. Sometimes, the gods welcome those who deserve liberation through their devotion to a deity, either the deity of their caste or one of their own choice. Sometimes, they watch over the destruction and the reconstruction of the worlds. At a more modest level, they may be the guardians of Dharma in a village.

Hardly has the cart arrived in Tiruvannamalai, when the sadhu takes Shanti and her family off to the slopes of the hill. From there, the travellers have a view of the entire temple: the central shrine, surrounded by stone courtyards and dominated by tall entrance gopurams; there are tanks, numerous shrines and other buildings scattered over the courtyards in the shade of big trees. Full of wonder, Shanti is contemplating this impressive holy place, one of the biggest in South India, and the abode of God Shiva who is here called 'Arunachaleswara', 'Lord of Arunachala'.

The Temple Seen from the Hill

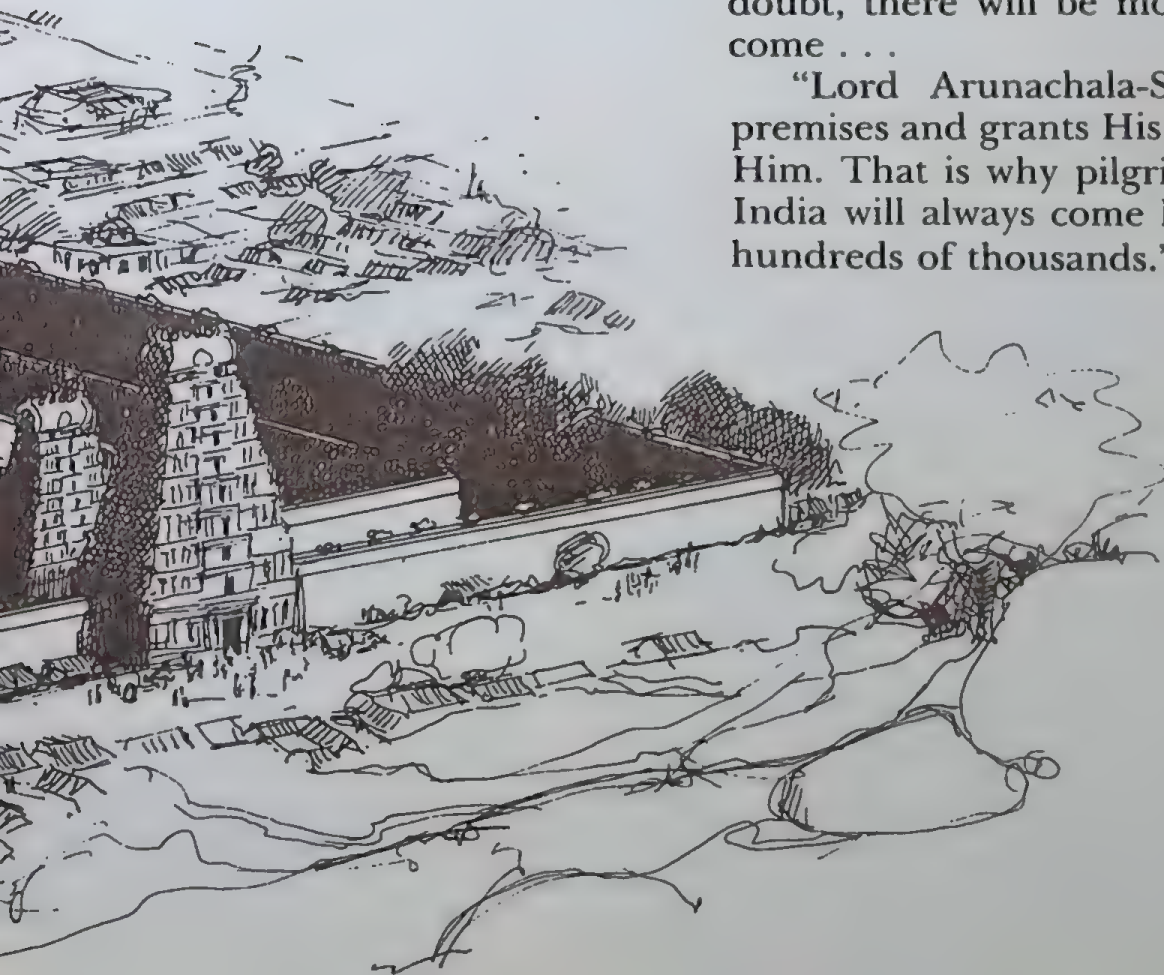
Main (eastern) entrance gopuram.



The sadhu gave the following explanation: "In the land of the Tamils Shiva is associated with each of the five elements — Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether — in five different holy places. Here, after hearing the story of the mountain, you will have guessed that Shiva is Fire. The temple we see today, at the end of this cool afternoon, is the result of more than nine centuries of building activities. Enlargements and alterations have succeeded one another, and one can find out the dates from the inscriptions which have been engraved on the walls since the 10th century. These inscriptions glorify local kings and other donors. This very ancient place of worship was originally merely a small isolated temple.

"Rebuilt and modified many times over the years, it has become the major temple we now see. The number of courtyards has increased, and as they became ever bigger, they started to include and encompass new buildings within their walls. The outer precinct you see is 465 metres long and 225 metres wide. It dates from the 16th century. But inside the walls the alterations have continued up till today. And, no doubt, there will be more of them in times to come . . .

"Lord Arunachala-Shiva rules over these premises and grants His grace to all who honour Him. That is why pilgrims from all over South India will always come here, year after year, in hundreds of thousands."

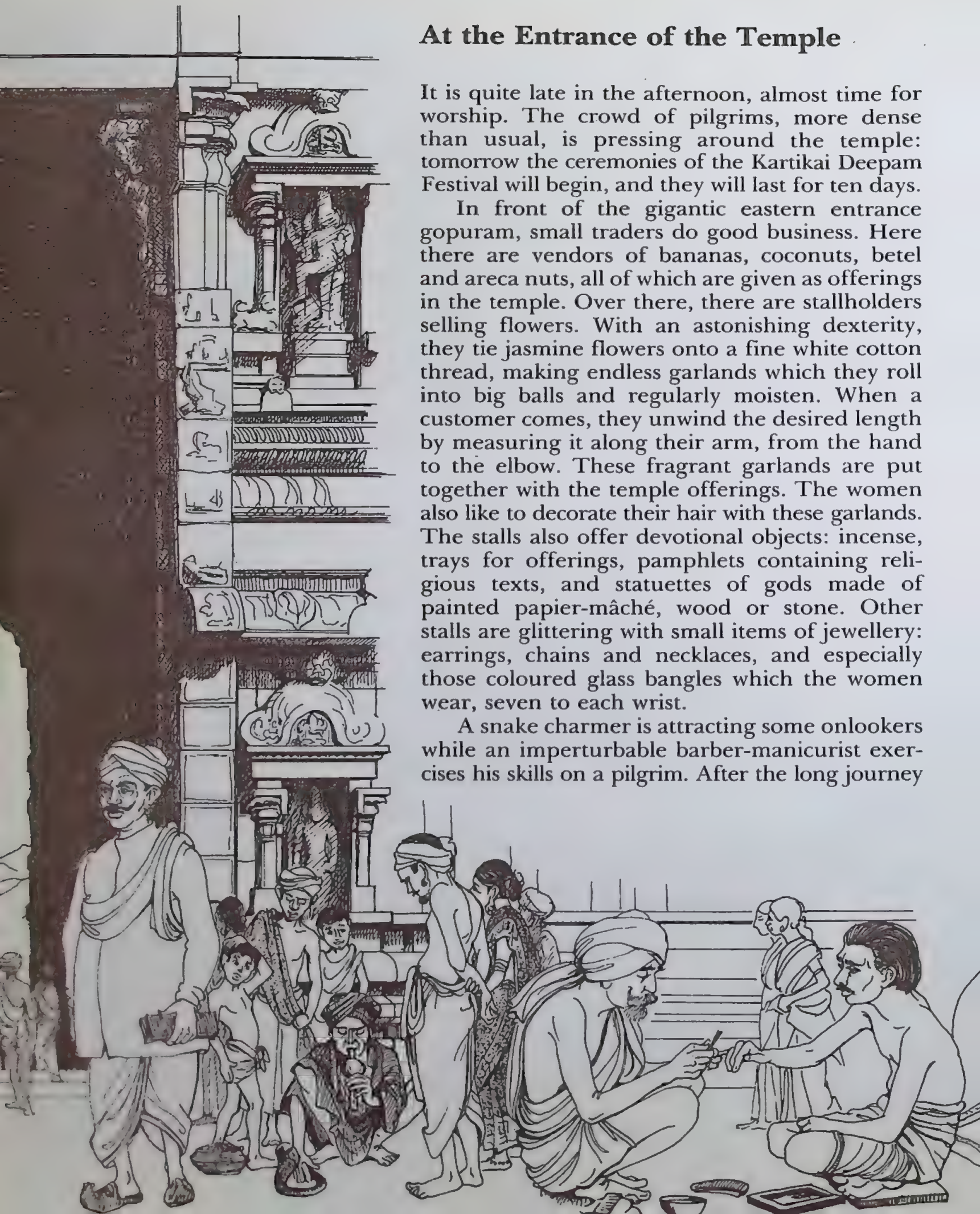


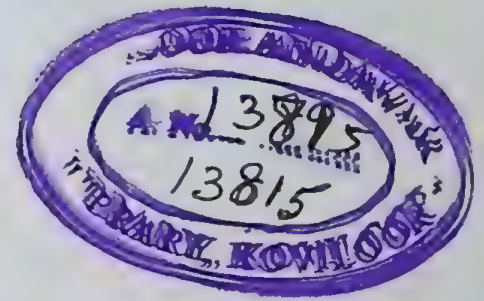
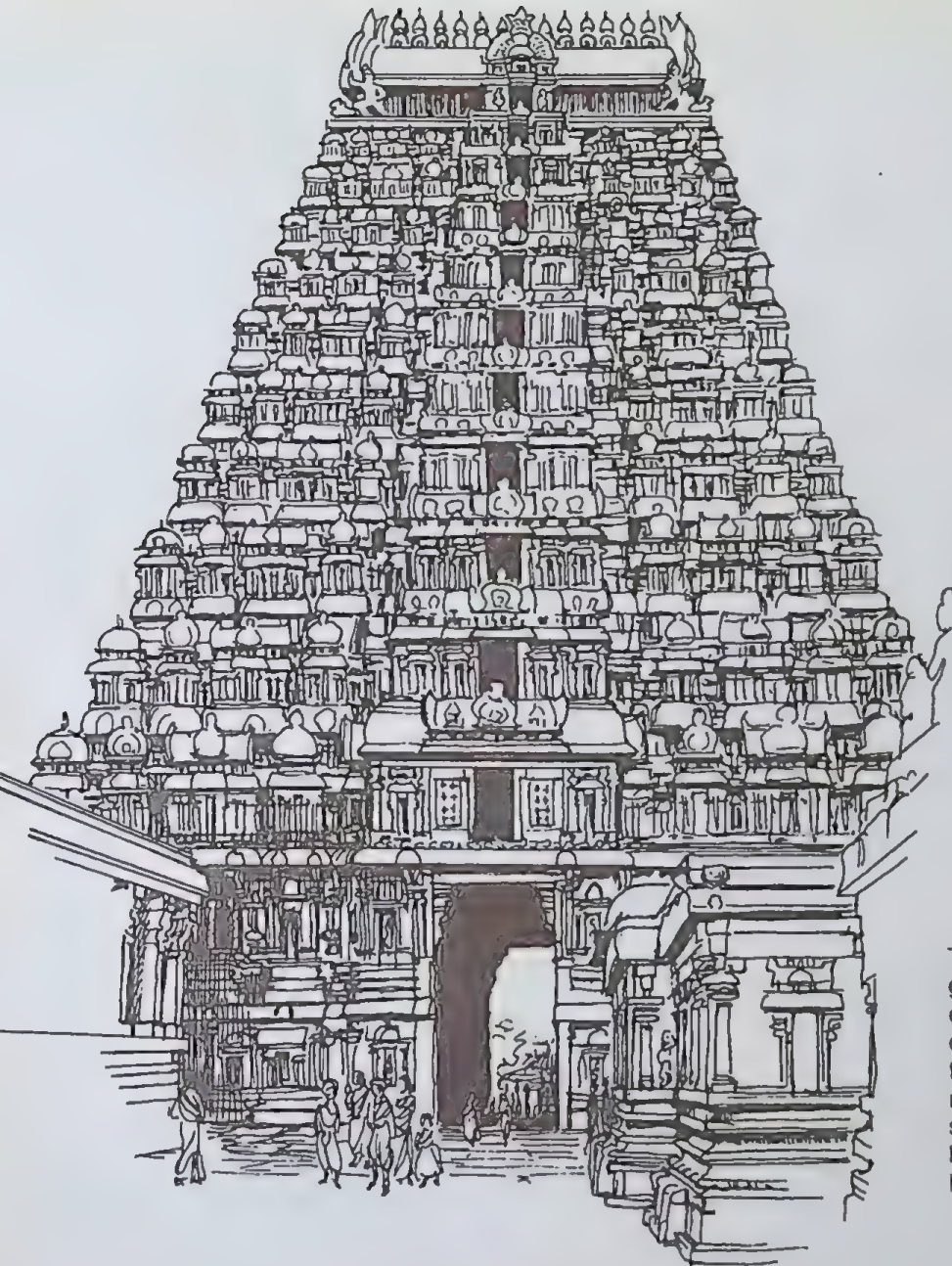
At the Entrance of the Temple

It is quite late in the afternoon, almost time for worship. The crowd of pilgrims, more dense than usual, is pressing around the temple: tomorrow the ceremonies of the Kartikai Deepam Festival will begin, and they will last for ten days.

In front of the gigantic eastern entrance gopuram, small traders do good business. Here there are vendors of bananas, coconuts, betel and areca nuts, all of which are given as offerings in the temple. Over there, there are stallholders selling flowers. With an astonishing dexterity, they tie jasmine flowers onto a fine white cotton thread, making endless garlands which they roll into big balls and regularly moisten. When a customer comes, they unwind the desired length by measuring it along their arm, from the hand to the elbow. These fragrant garlands are put together with the temple offerings. The women also like to decorate their hair with these garlands. The stalls also offer devotional objects: incense, trays for offerings, pamphlets containing religious texts, and statuettes of gods made of painted papier-mâché, wood or stone. Other stalls are glittering with small items of jewellery: earrings, chains and necklaces, and especially those coloured glass bangles which the women wear, seven to each wrist.

A snake charmer is attracting some onlookers while an imperturbable barber-manicurist exercises his skills on a pilgrim. After the long journey



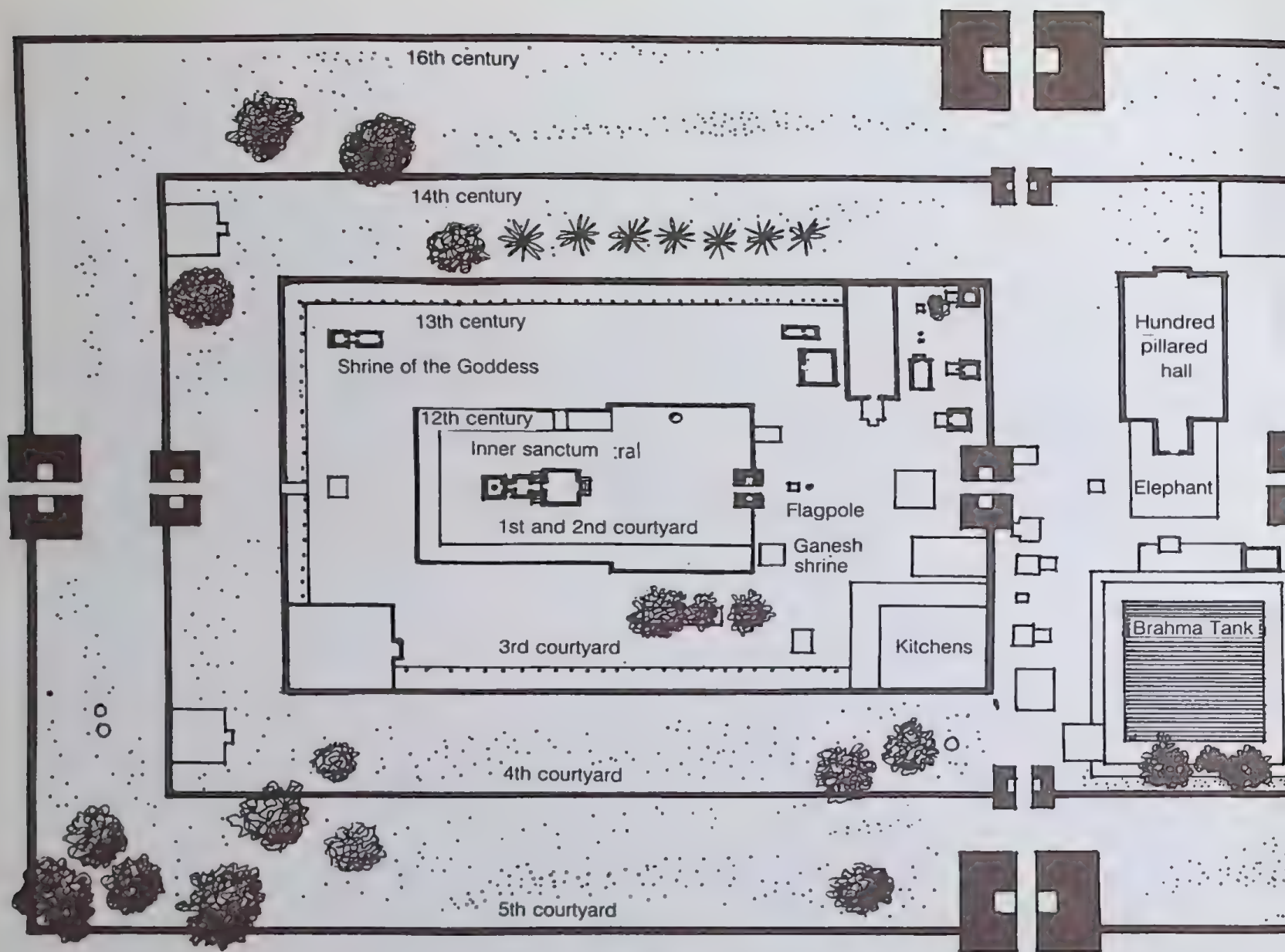


The tower of the eastern entrance gopuram, located in the outer wall, dominates the eight other ones that crown the gates made in the walls at the four cardinal points. With its massive stone base and its pyramid-shaped tower of **stucco**-coated bricks, this gopuram is 54 metres high.

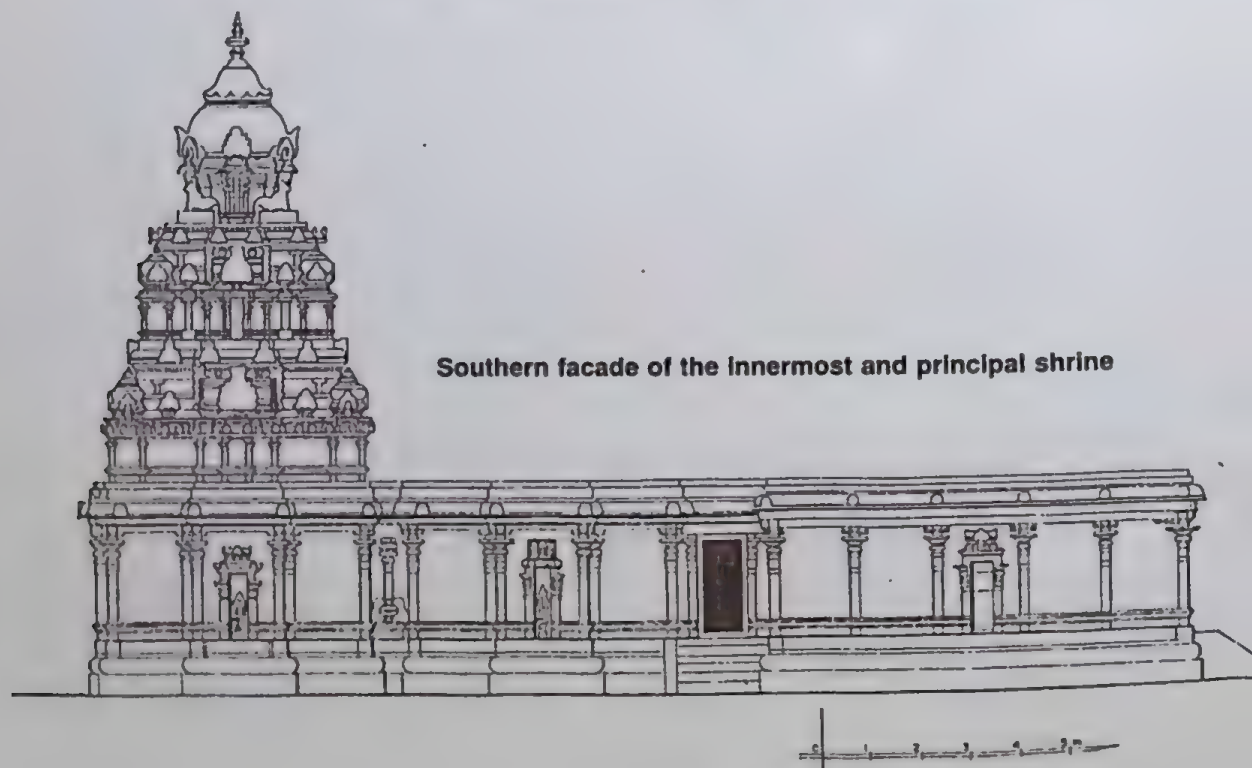
people have to make themselves presentable before entering the temple. Often, they have their heads shaved as a devotional offering to the presiding deity. In the crowd, some men are seen wearing a long shirt-jacket above their 'dhoti' (a length of white cotton cloth wrapped around the waist and between the legs, the main item of men's clothing). They are administrative employees who work for the British. The one we see here is a bailiff at the court.

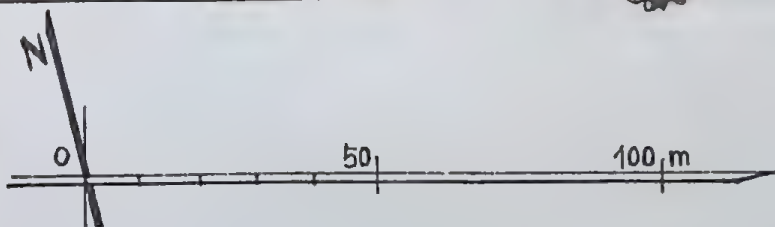
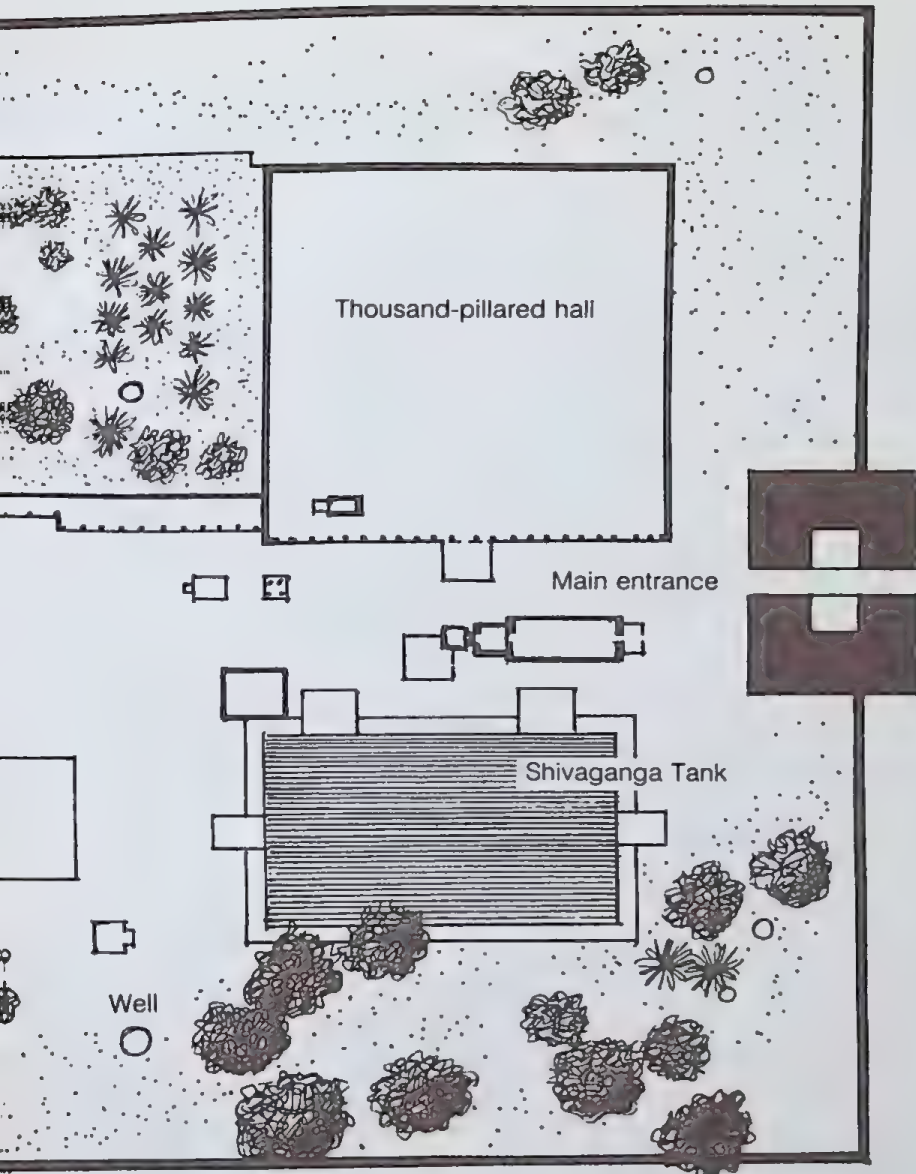
Madhavan and his family have gone through the shadowy zone of the enormous porchway. The flagstones under their bare feet are still hot from the afternoon sun. They are going to walk ritually round each courtyard in a clockwise direction, that is, always keeping the centre of the temple on their right side (this is called *pradakshina*), in order to get to the gate of the central shrine by walking in concentric circles.





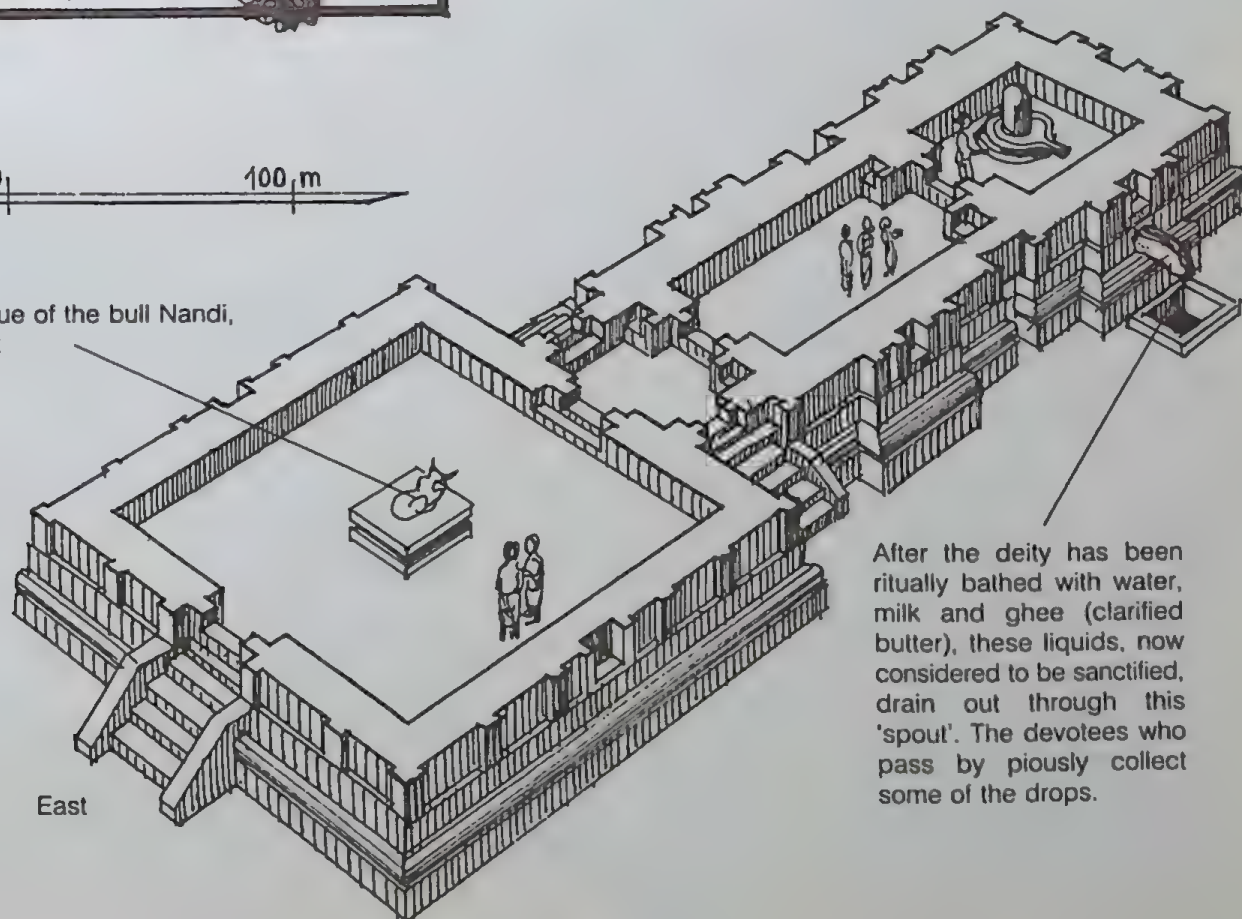
Map of the temple in 1845





Reclining statue of the bull Nandi,
Shiva's mount

Perspective map of the
Innermost shrine

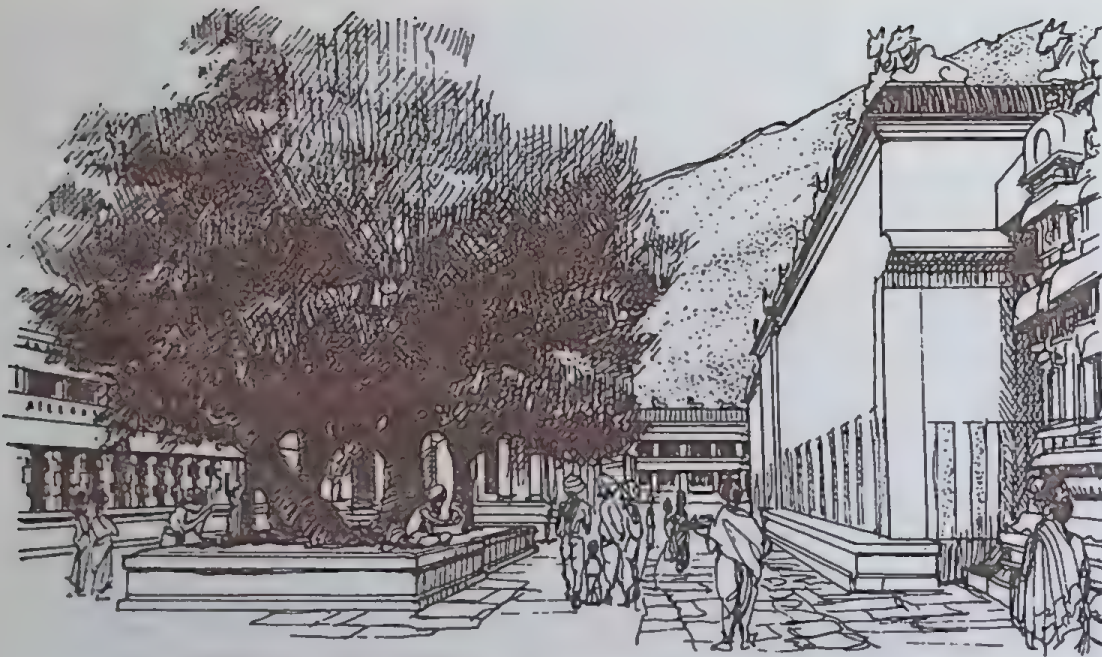


After the deity has been ritually bathed with water, milk and ghee (clarified butter), these liquids, now considered to be sanctified, drain out through this 'spout'. The devotees who pass by piously collect some of the drops.

The construction of a Hindu temple is governed by very strict rules which determine the introduction and orientation of the various architectural elements. The innermost shrine opens to the east and accommodates the principal deity of the place, in this case Lord Shiva. The courtyards are counted, starting from the centre. In Tiruvannamalai, there are said to be seven of them: five were constructed, but the first one disappeared in the course of the nine centuries of extensions and alterations; the sixth is represented by the four 'Charriot streets' around the temple and the seventh by the road surrounding the hill. The location of the shrines dedicated to the deities and the buildings used for rituals are strictly laid out so that they are oriented to the east. In the corner of a courtyard, and always on the south-eastern side, are the kitchens where Brahmins prepare the offerings consisting of cooked food. Trees, one of which is sacred and is 'the tree of the place,' are always present as are tanks and wells which contain the water used for purification rituals.

The innermost shrine, called the 'garbha graha', houses a small square room, cramped and dark, wherein resides the 'Sellai', the image of Lord Shiva, almost always in the symbolic form of a 'lingam'. This is an upright stone, square at the bottom, octagonal in the middle, then cylindrical with a rounded top. The base is embedded in a circular or oval plinth. Only the officiating Brahmin priests may enter the Sellai. The devotees watch the worship from the hall in front of it. They line up near the portal in a row, one behind the other, reverently observing the progress of the rites.

Daily Life In the Temple



In ordinary circumstances the sacred temple elephant stays with his **mahout** under a pavilion supported by columns near the hundred-pillared hall. He gives his blessings by placing his trunk over the heads of the devotees who, in return, give him an offering of a small coin.

The priests who are associated with the temple are all Brahmins. Like all men of high caste, they wear the white cotton 'sacred thread' across their chest over the left shoulder. Only they may perform the rites. As they are married, they hand down their knowledge and responsibilities to their sons.

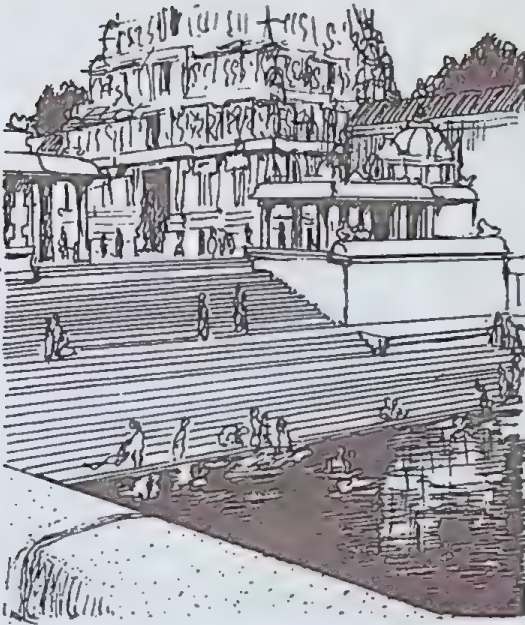


A family that has come from some nearby village takes a rest and a light meal near a small shrine in the third courtyard.



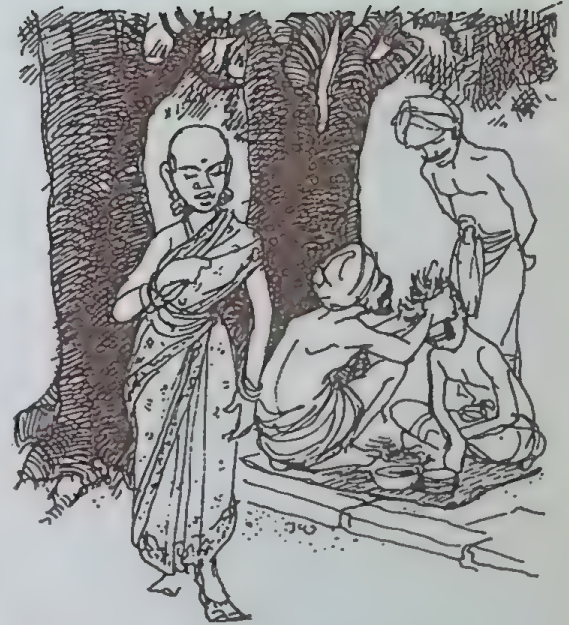
Every evening the mahout washes the elephant with the help of some temple servants near a well in the fifth courtyard.





Long flights of steps lead to the purifying water of the Brahma Tank, where devotees perform their ablutions.

In the fifth courtyard a barber is shaving the heads of those men and women who, as an act of veneration, offer up their hair to God. They soften the rash caused by the shaving by smearing sandal or turmeric paste on their heads.



The ceremonies in the temple are numerous and quite varied; they are celebrated according to the Tamil lunar calendar or they are performed at the request of some devotee or generous donor to the temple. But there is always regular worship, 'puja', four times a day. Food and flame offerings are made through the priest, who knows the formulas and who officiates at the Sellai. The participants then receive 'vibhuti', sacred ash, and mark their foreheads with it. Musical accompaniment for the ceremony is provided by the temple musicians. Outside, devotees respectfully collect some of the liquid with which the lingam has been bathed. It drains out through a spout located on the north side, under a statue of Brahma.





These 12th century bas-reliefs are part of a series of sculptures depicting the complete repertoire of dance figures in Chidambaram, a temple in south-eastern Tamil Nadu which is dedicated to Lord Nataraja, Shiva in His Cosmic Dance.

Dance in the Temple

'Bharata Natyam,' sacred dance as a religious ceremony, is very much appreciated by the gods. Is not Shiva, under the name of Nataraja, the 'Lord of the Dance' — He who with either a fearsome or a light step governs the rhythm of the unfolding of the Universe? And is not Parvati, His slim-waisted consort, She who taught this art to humans? . . . Bharata Natyam, in the Tamil land, involves not only dance but also chanting, music and dramatic miming. The great dancing masters and the consecrated dancers have handed it down from century to century in the temples to which they belong.

Like the other fifty-two dancers who are associated with the temple of Tiruvannamalai, Nalini is a 'devadasi', that is, a servant of God. At her birth she was dedicated by her family to the service of Lord Shiva. From the time when she was six and for more than seven years, she has been trained in the rigorous technique of attitudes and gestures, all of which have a very precise meaning. She has learnt to read and write and has studied the religious texts which provide the inspiration for her dances. She is educated, which is rare for a young girl in 1845. The tapping of her bare feet on the ground and the tinkling of the small bells adorning her ankles set the rhythm to the skillful play of her gestures and poses. In this way, Nalini can express all the nuances of the story she is telling with her body: she is a great dancer.

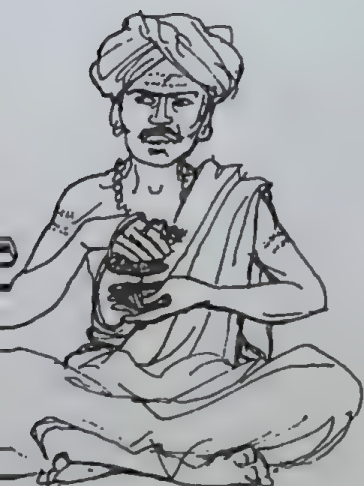
Bharata Natyam is accompanied by music and chanting. The accompaniment consists of a percussion instrument, a sort of oboe with a very strident sound, and small cymbals.



This attitude signifies: 'Shiva with His head adorned by the crescent moon, receiving the river Ganga in His hair.'



Towards the end of the 19th century, Bharata Natyam will gradually disappear under the Puritan pressure of the British. From 1925 onwards, and especially after Independence, great Indian artists, in search of their cultural roots, will revive the ancient sacred dancing. But it will henceforth be performed only on the stage.



In all of **Tamil Nadu**, the great religious festival of the lunar month of Kartikai (November-December) is that of Deepam, 'the Holy Beacon'. But it is in Tiruvannamalai that this celebration is most important: here, according to legend, Shiva manifested Himself in the form of a column of fire which, for the sake of mankind, He later transformed into the sacred hill Arunachala. The hill is still worshipped as a manifestation of Shiva and the Kartikai Deepam festival has been held from time immemorial to commemorate this event. For ten days, numerous ceremonies take place in the temple and in the town. On the tenth day, when the constellation of Kartikai (the Pleiades) is in conjunction with the full moon, the festival reaches its climax and the Holy Beacon is lit on the summit of the hill.

The rites performed each day are too numerous and complex to be described in detail. But one can immerse oneself in the buzzing crowd of thousands of pilgrims who swarm into the small town and the courtyards of the temple in order

The Festival of Kartikai Deepam

1st day: Tuesday, 2nd December, 1845

On the morning of the first day, during worship, the priests raise the flag on the flagpole of the temple. It is a very long piece of white cloth painted with symbolic patterns.



On the same day, the sacred fire is lit in the 'hall of sacrifices'. It will be kept going for ten days. Here, the priest performs an **oblation**, in this case, an offering to the sacred fire.



Vasanthara Bandariyar, Zamindar of Vetavalam (1830–1855), the official representative of the temple.



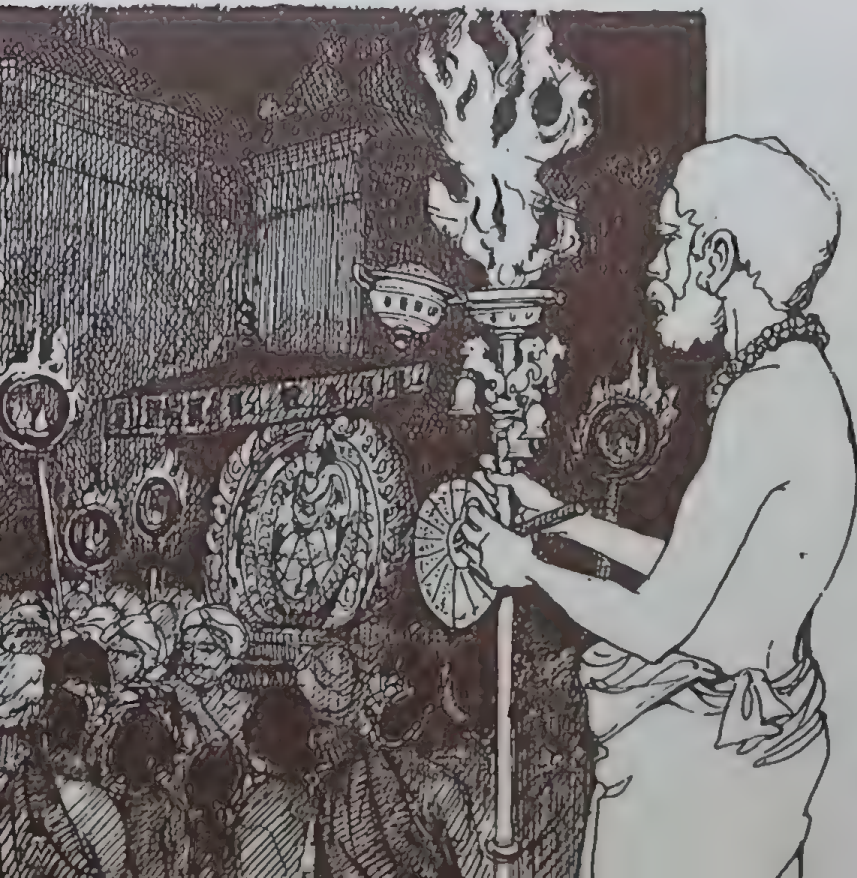
to ardently follow the worship performed in the various shrines, and to ecstatically follow the deities as they are taken out and carried in procession in their grand and lofty chariots. On these occasions only the heads and hands emerge from the shimmering silks and glorious flowers that the deities are draped in. One can be dazzled by the incredible sumptuousness of the gold and precious stone jewellery with which they are adorned; one can inhale the fragrance of the huge garlands decorating them and the heady aroma of the camphor and incense that are being burnt everywhere in their honour. And lastly, one can thrill to the vibrant music of the 'oboes' and drums which accompany all the ceremonies.

Even today, the Kartikai Deepam Festival still takes place every year and is more or less unchanged in spite of the centuries.

A Zamindar is a local nobleman who rules over a region and administers it. The British make great use of Zamindars to maintain order and to ensure that taxes are collected.

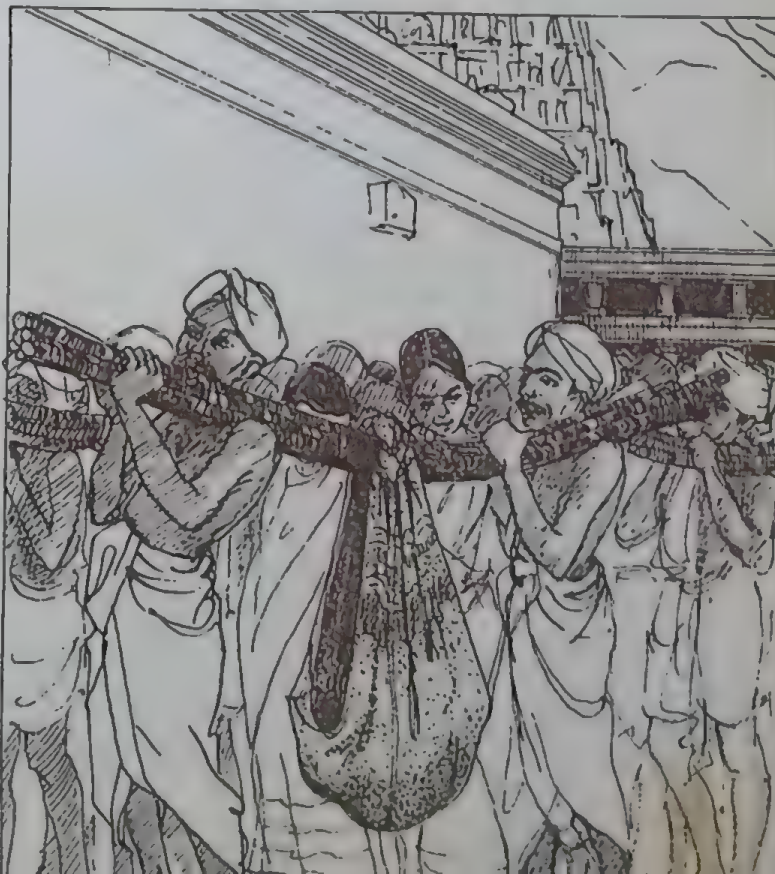
5th day

Under the aegis of the Zamindar, a nocturnal procession is making headway in the courtyards of the temple. It is illuminated by straw torches. A sadhu is burning incense on his way through the temple.



6th day

The children for whom the families have made a vow to go on pilgrimage are carried in procession. They lie in a cradle made of a silk sari hanging from a long support of sugar canes tied together.

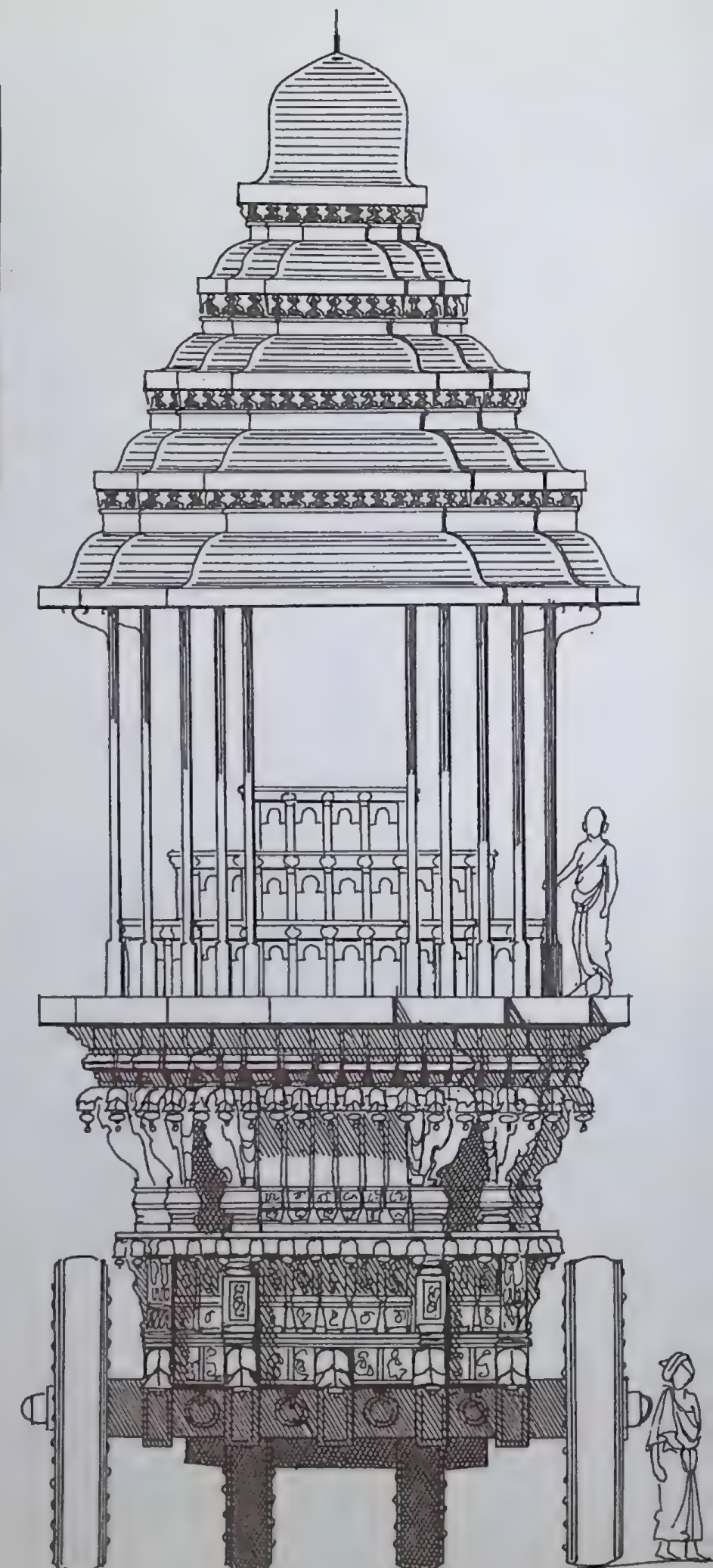




The chariot and its mounting-pavillion. A temporary gangway has been put up.



Detail of a wood sculpture on the chariot.



The Procession Chariots

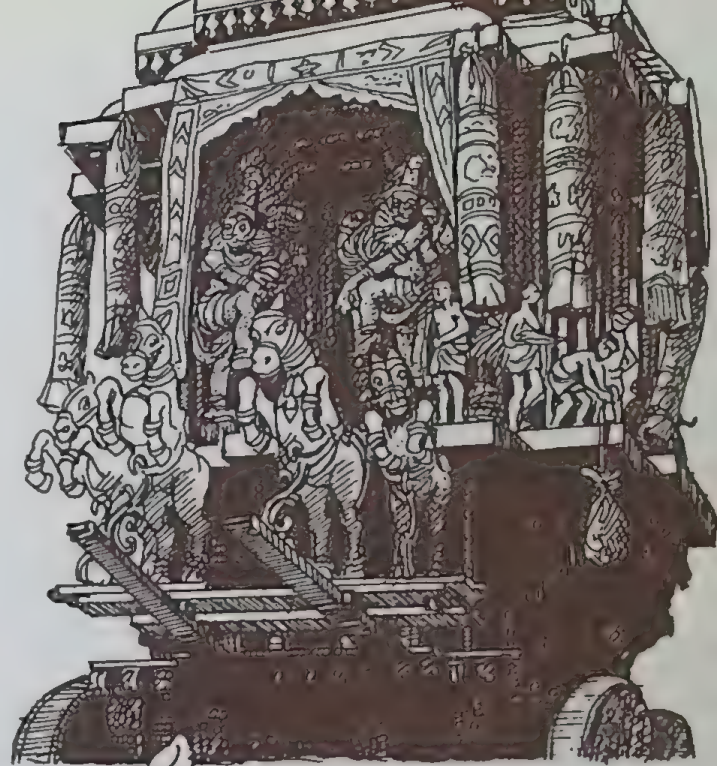
Everywhere in India, during certain festivals, images of deities composed of the five precious metals are placed on vehicles and pulled in procession around the temples. In the Tamil land, these chariots, which are veritable mobile temples, are remarkable. They are made entirely of wood and have quite varied dimensions, but all of them have been designed according to the same model and are only used once a year. Those in Tiruvannamalai are very big and grand.

The most impressive one, the one we see here, is used only on the seventh day and is twelve metres high. The body of the chariot rests on a chassis of strong beams and six wooden wheels: four on the outermost corners and two in the middle. There are two spaces in the framework which are designed to allow free movement of the two central wheels. This two-storey framework is surrounded by profusely sculpted panels: floral designs, mythical animals, images of gods and goddesses, and mythological scenes. The platform, which is 4.50 metres from the ground, supports a high pavillion. Inside the pavillion is the pedestal that is to support the statue of the deity. It thus looks like a gopuram over a temple shrine.

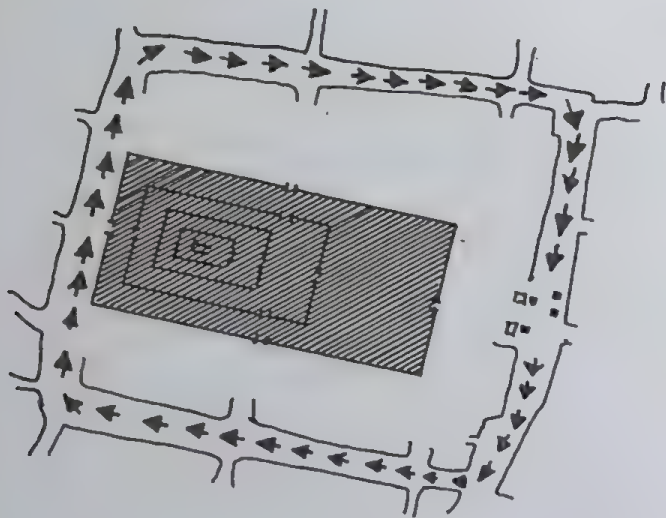
The chariot is parked alongside a mounting-pavillion, a construction giving porters access, via a staircase, to the level of the platform. A temporary wooden footbridge links the mounting-pavillion to the chariot.

The Chariot is Dressed for the Festival

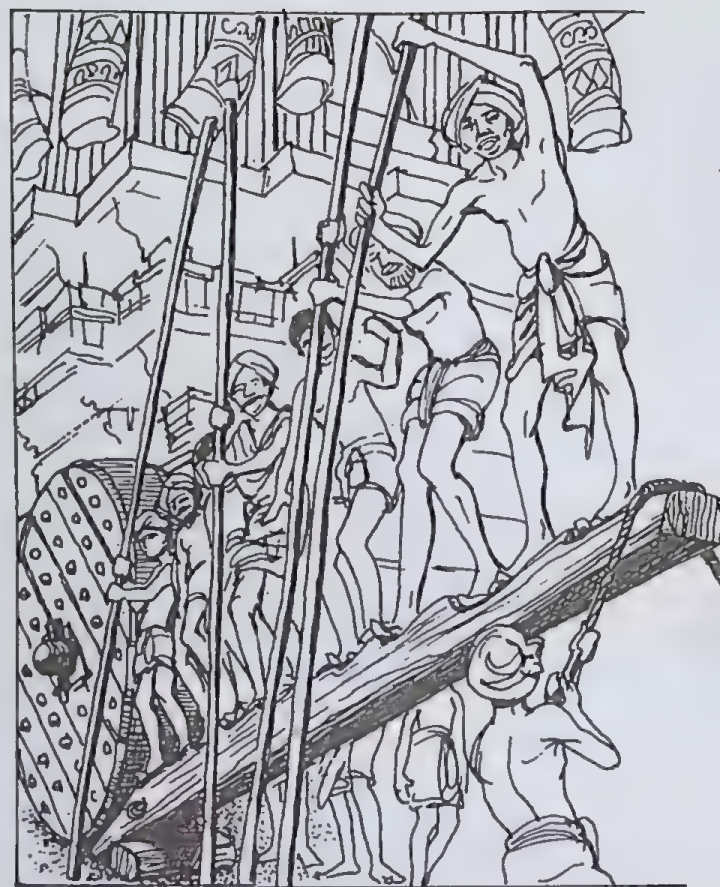
The roof of the pavillion is covered with costly hangings. Long cloth tubes with multicoloured appliqué embroidered patterns are swaying in the wind. Two 'gatekeepers' of ferocious appearance are on watch at the entrance of the pavillion. They are similar to those that stand at the entrances of the shrines. Four wooden horses, hitched up and supported by a temporary platform that is fixed to the front, seem to want to rush forward. The chariot is ready. It weighs over 220 tons. To pull it, hundreds of men are going to grip two enormous ropes that are attached to the back. The ropes have a diameter of fifteen centimetres and are over fifty metres long.



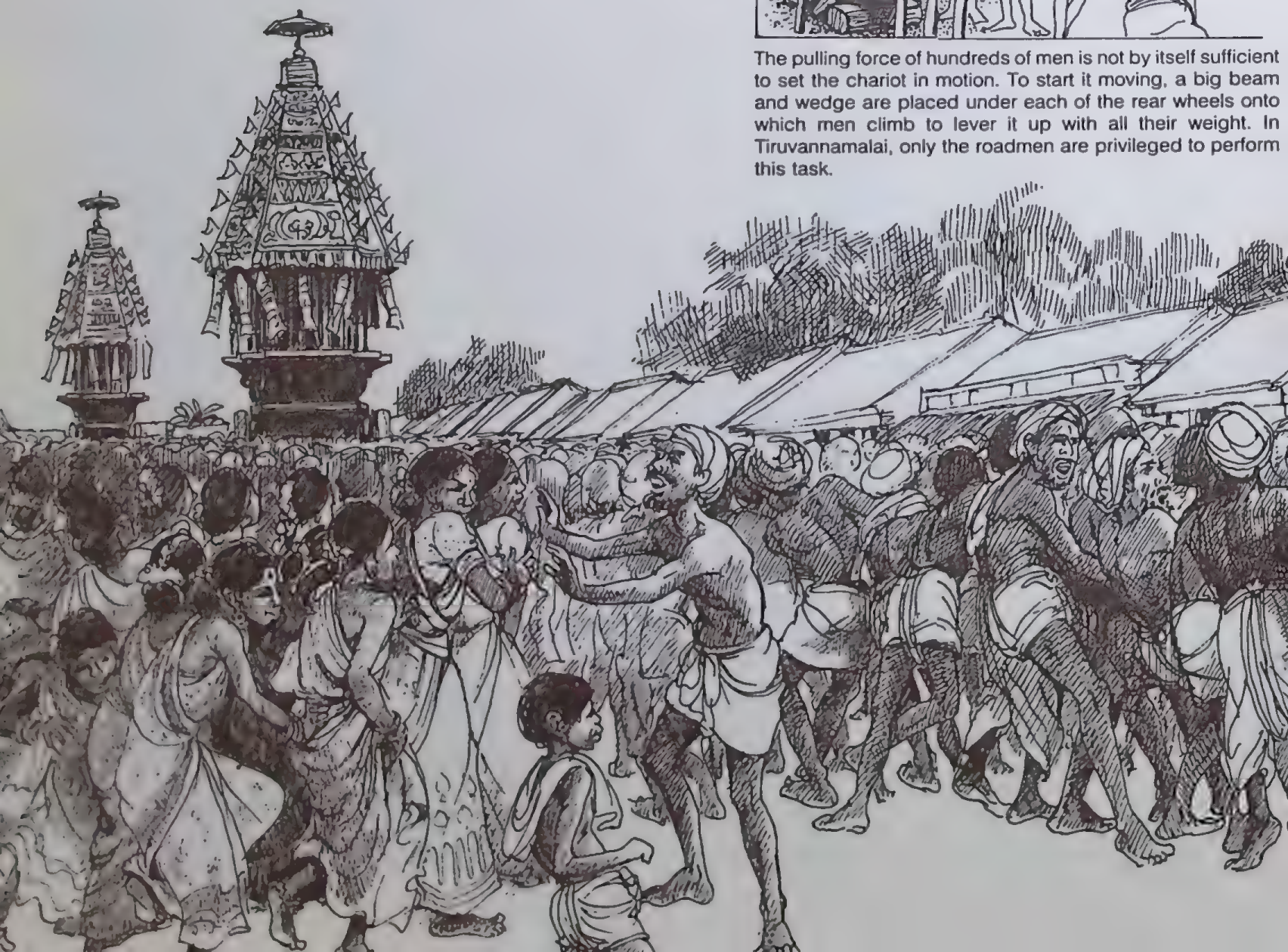
A gatekeeper or 'dvarapala' leaning on his club.

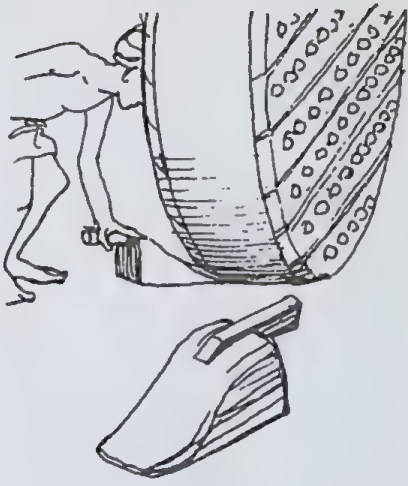


The procession goes round the temple along the four 'chariot streets' (approximately 2 km).



The pulling force of hundreds of men is not by itself sufficient to set the chariot in motion. To start it moving, a big beam and wedge are placed under each of the rear wheels onto which men climb to lever it up with all their weight. In Tiruvannamalai, only the roadmen are privileged to perform this task.





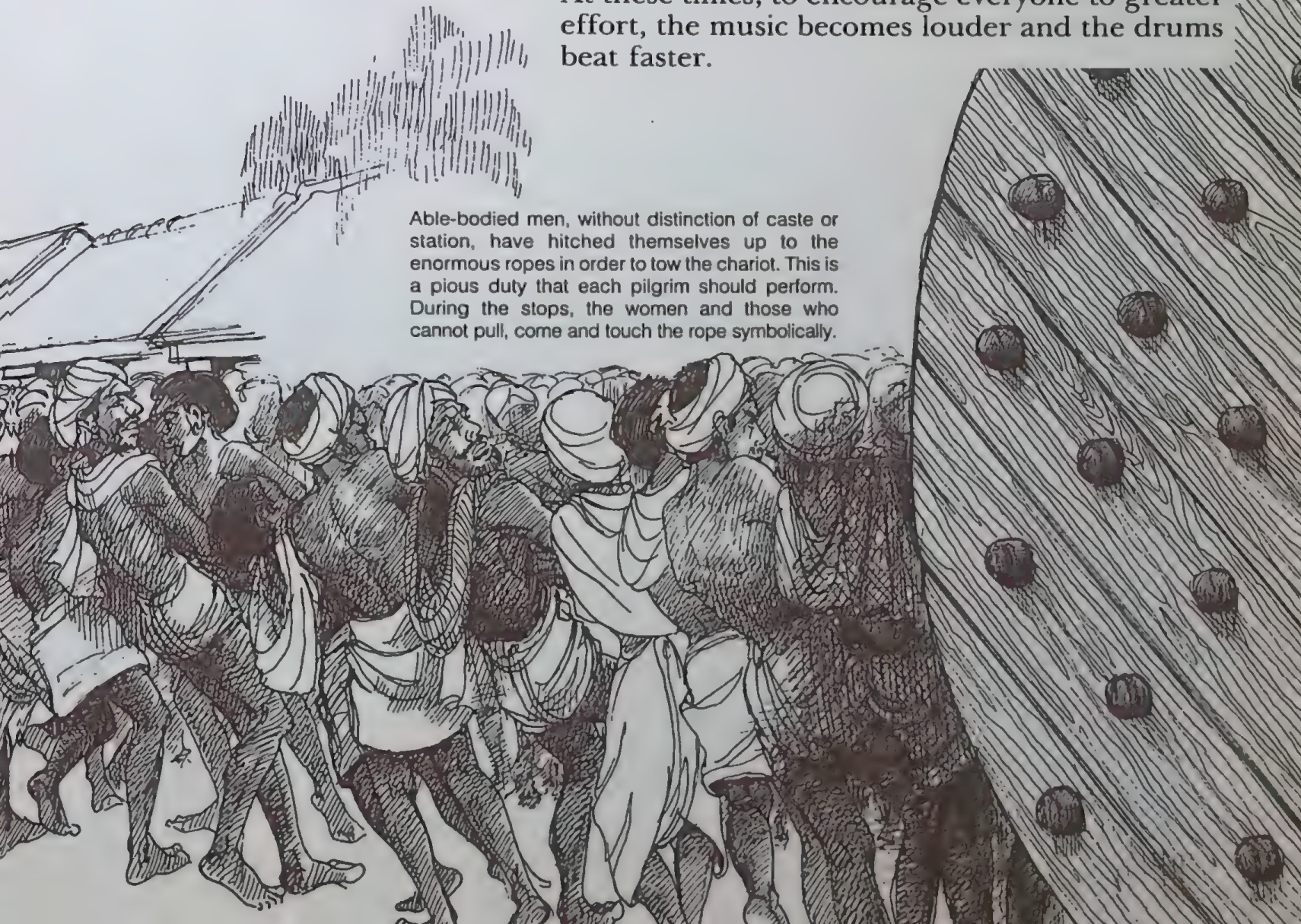
Because the axles are fixed, the wheels have no steering capacity. To direct the chariot, carpenters slide big wedges at an angle under the wheels. The chariot then turns in a series of small jolts.

The 7th Day

Today, Monday, the 8th of December, 1845, five chariots will follow one another on the route of the four streets surrounding the temple. Around seven o'clock in the morning, the first chariot sets off, carrying Ganesh. Behind it comes that of Subrahmanya, then that of Shiva and Parvati, followed by the chariot of the Goddess alone. The last one, carrying Chandikeshvara, will return to the front of its mounting-pavillion only by nine o'clock in the evening.

There are priests and musicians on the platform, and the latter's tunes accompany the movements of the cart. Progress is slow and jerky due to the uneven road. Consequently, the chariot has to stop frequently. In order to start it again, the rear wheels, which often get stuck in ruts or potholes, are extricated by the big levers. At these times, to encourage everyone to greater effort, the music becomes louder and the drums beat faster.

Able-bodied men, without distinction of caste or station, have hitched themselves up to the enormous ropes in order to tow the chariot. This is a pious duty that each pilgrim should perform. During the stops, the women and those who cannot pull, come and touch the rope symbolically.





The 10th Day

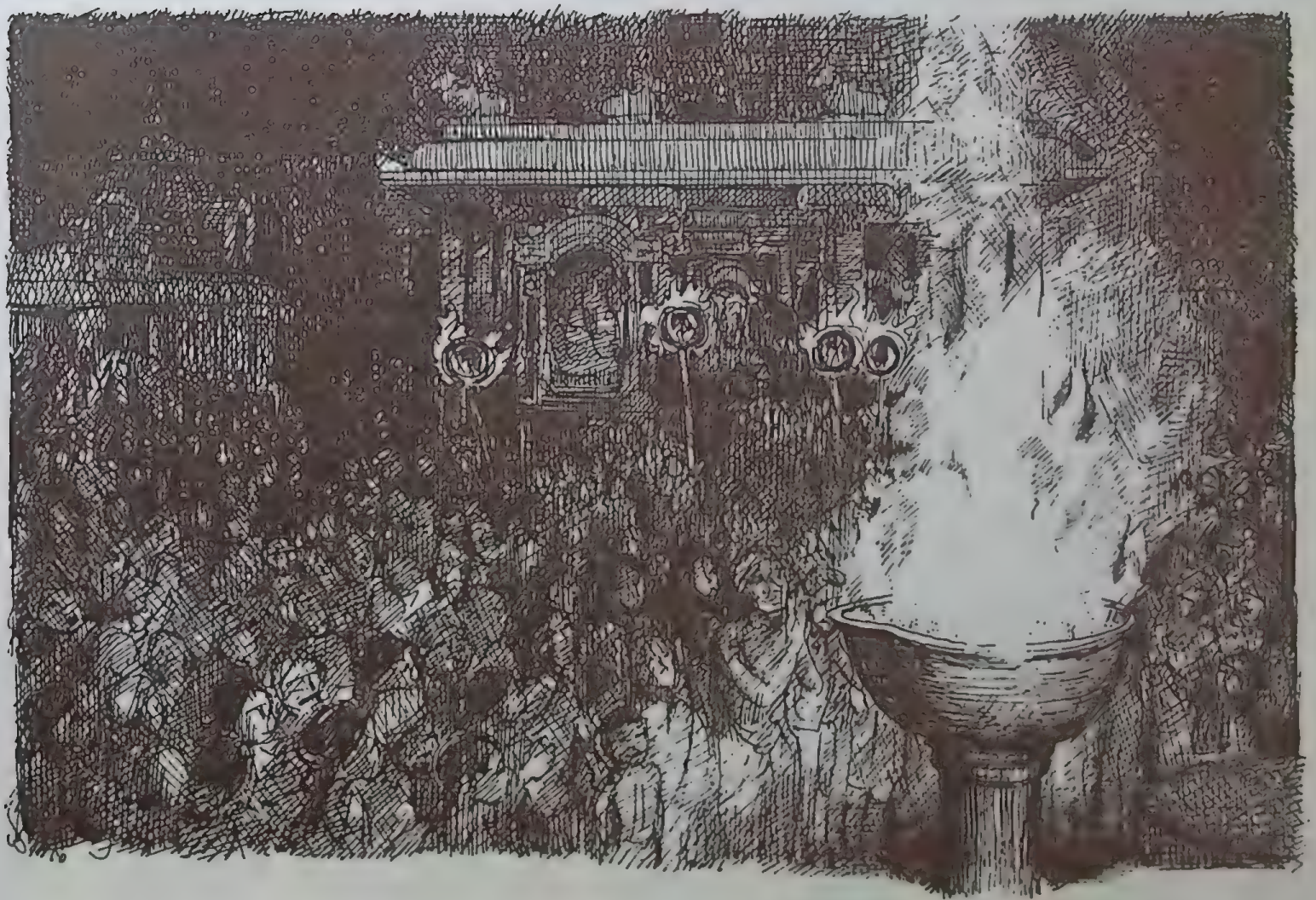
Thursday, the 11th of December, 1845. At long last the much-awaited day has arrived: the celebration of Shiva manifesting as the infinite column of fire which later became Arunachala. In the early morning some men from the fishermen's community have come to take a few embers from the sacred fire. They will take them up to the top of the hill in small clay pots. They will also take long lengths of white cloth which will be placed into the great copper cauldron to serve as wicks so that the flame on the summit may be lit. To feed this gigantic fire, several hundred litres of ghee (clarified butter) mixed with camphor will be needed. The devotees supply all this. They buy the ghee in the temple in pots which they either take to the top themselves or send up with porters.

In the temple, the priests have prepared five clay bowls filled with ghee. They light the wicks with the fire they have kept going throughout the festival. The five flames will be carried in procession to the big metal oil lamp which has been placed near the flagpole of the temple. This will be the ceremonial fire which will be lit at the same time that the fire on the summit is lit.

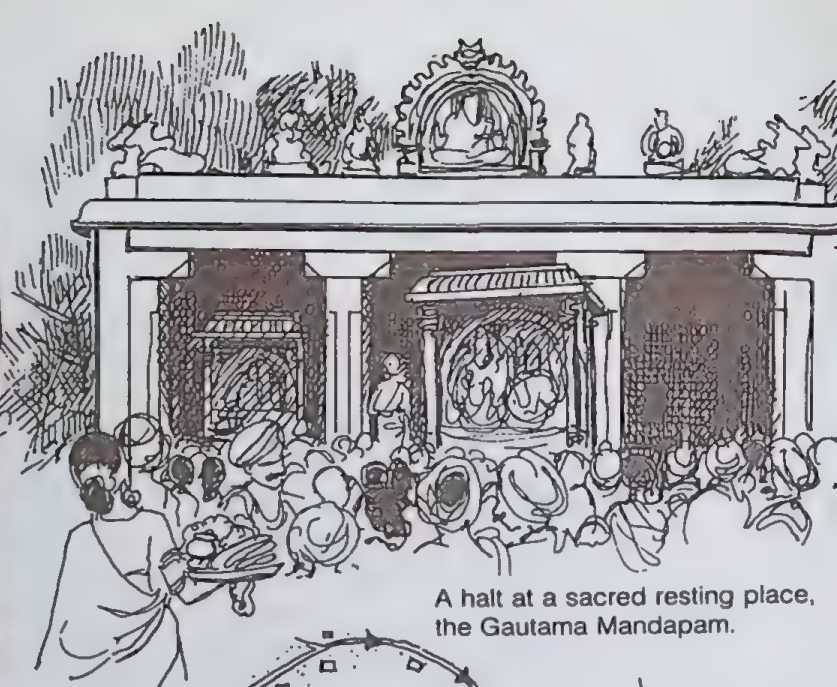
The Column of Fire

Thousands of pilgrims, who have observed absolute fasting on this day, have swarmed into the courtyards of the temple. Some of them have been there since the beginning of the afternoon. All of them are awaiting the great climax of the festival. At six o'clock, as the sun sets and the full moon rises, the fire on the mountain and the one in the temple are simultaneously lit. At the solemn instant when the two flames shoot up, the crowd roars, in a single voice, "Arunachala-Shiva!" From within a thirteen kilometre radius, one can see the beacon on top of the hill. It will continue to burn for several days, an inspiration for all who behold it.





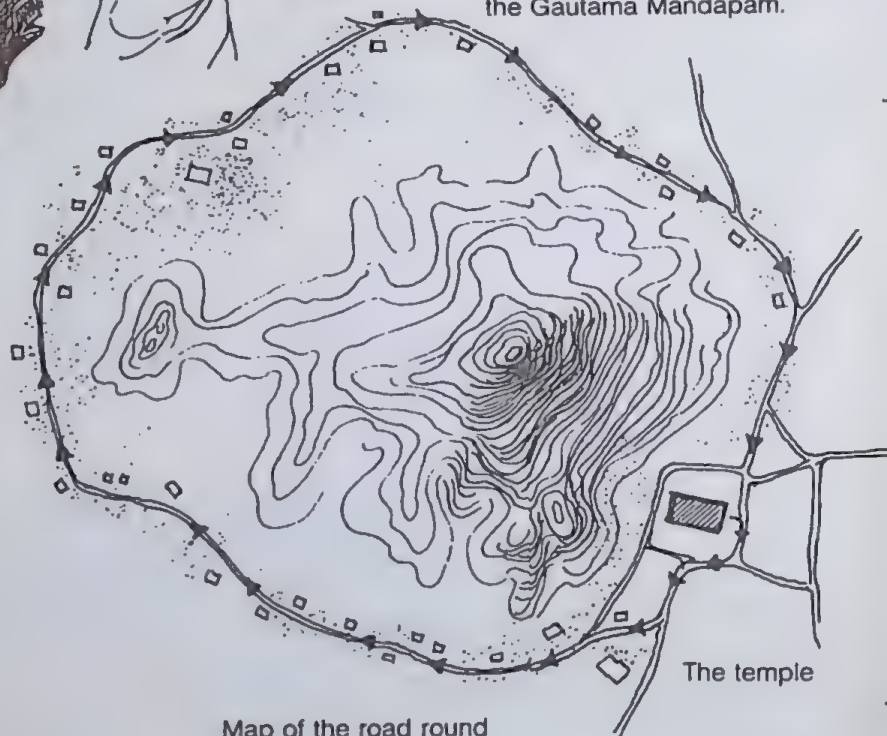
Saris are draped around the Goddess.



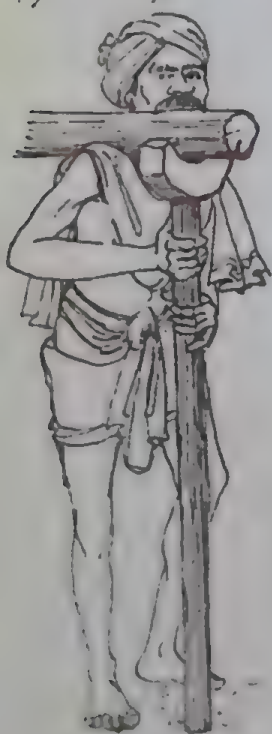
A halt at a sacred resting place, the Gautama Mandapam.



Offerings on the way



Map of the road round the mountain



The method of carrying

A porter during a stop



Going Round the Sacred Mountain

The culmination of the festival occurs two days later, when the deities are carried around the holy hill in magnificent palanquins borne on the shoulders of male devotees. Along the fourteen-kilometre-long road there are, at intervals, sacred tanks, small shrines and sacred resting places where the Gods will stop to bestow blessings and receive offerings.

Towards seven o'clock in the morning the procession, greeted with loud music from long trumpets, leaves the temple by the eastern gopuram. Drummers lead the way, followed by dancers from the temple who punctuate their rhythmical march by graceful hand gestures. They go only part of the way. After dancing during a brief halt in the procession, they return to the temple. The procession itself keeps moving forward to the sound of the drummers and the chanting of the devotees.

On the way, pilgrims and local residents stop the procession near shrines or near their houses to offer flowers, betel, bananas and sugar candy. The priests place these gifts on a tray illuminated by a small camphor flame before offering them to the Gods. During these breaks on the way, the porters support the shafts with wooden props in order to relieve their shoulders for a time. During longer stops at the sacred resting places, they may eat, rest and regain their strength to continue the day-long procession.

The sacred resting places, called 'mandapams', are constructions enclosed on three sides, with wide openings at the front. They usually consist of pillars supporting a flat roof or a brick and stucco dome. Arriving there, the deities are placed on the platform in the middle. Important offerings have already been prepared: fruits, flower garlands, fine dhotis and costly saris, and rose water to refresh the Gods. The priests unfold the clothes and drape them over the deities; on their return they will store them in the temple. These clothes may be used to dress the deities on other festival days. The devotees who have made the offerings receive as 'prasadam' a garland from one or more of the deities as well as some sacred ash. As night sets in, the procession returns to the temple . . .



In Town

Map of Tiruvannamalai in 1845



A public letter-writer.
He draws the letters on latania palm
leaves with a stylus.



Madhavan and his family stay on in Tiruvannamalai for one more day in order to do some shopping and to visit the cattle fair that always takes place during the Kartikai Deepam Festival. After the bustle of the last few days, the town seems very quiet. This small town of barely 10,000 inhabitants has very modest dimensions compared to those of the temple around which it is built.

The population is divided up into quarters according to their castes and activities. Some Brahmin houses have been built near the north side of temple and the Indra Tank in the south-east of the town. The houses of the tradesmen, who make up a large and wealthy community, are near the bazaar on the east side of the temple. The landowners are gathered at the periphery of the built-up area. The craftsmen and artisans also have their specialized streets.

In the Bazaar

Small shops open out onto the lanes of the bazaar: goods are often displayed in front, in the shade of bamboo and palm-leaf canopies. As in all Indian markets, the crowd is dense, the colours bright, the cries loud and compelling. Strong smells mingle with the scent of flowers and burning incense. People bargain fiercely over the price of the smallest item. They take their time fingering the fabrics that are tirelessly unfolded by the shopkeeper; the fabrics pile up in multicoloured waves on a mat on the ground. Soon, they will be folded up again by a child who assists in the shop. Customers buy small quantities of flour, vegetables, herbs, condiments and spices, wrapped in tree leaves or paper. The market is a meeting place, and people usually come there at least twice a day. In 1845, the monetary unit is the British **rupee**. For ten years all the coins that have been struck have carried the face of the King or Queen of England. Notes will not be put back in circulation until 1861.



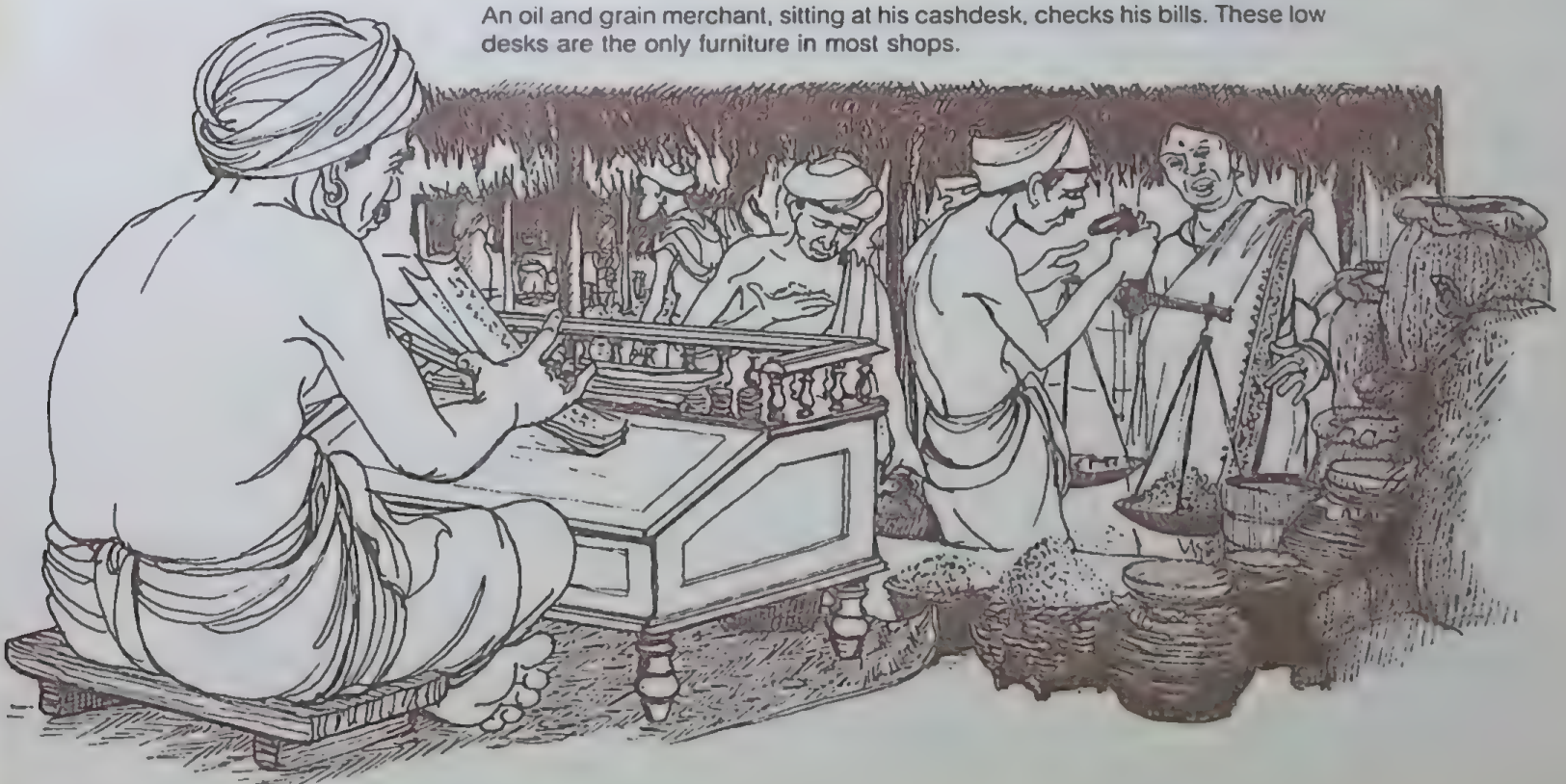
A quiet street in a traditional Tamil residential area.

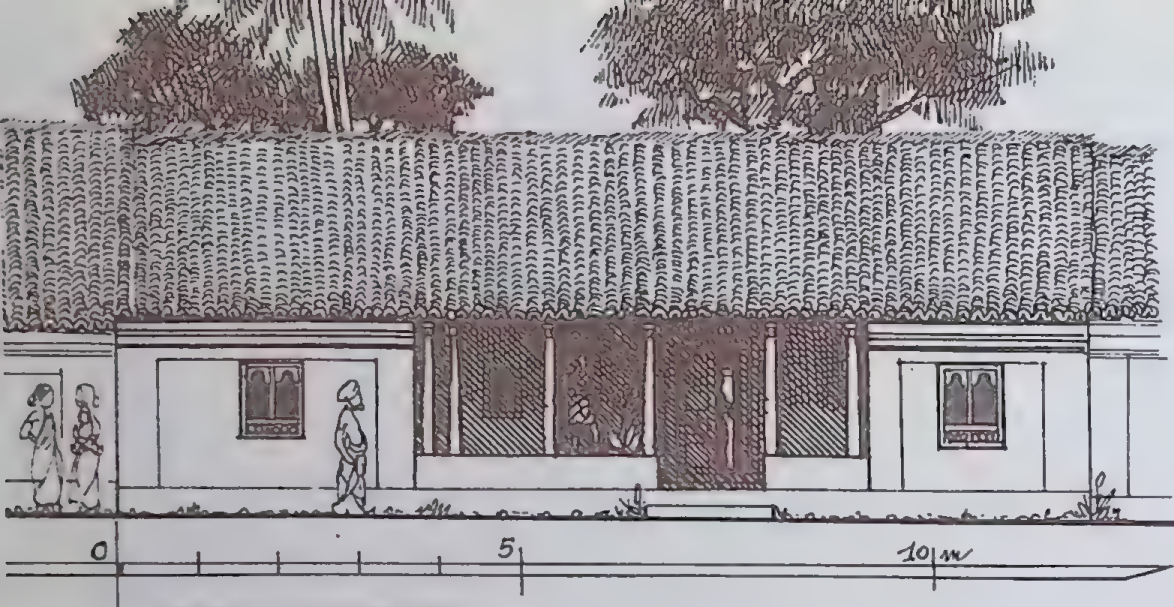
At the pharmacist's shop. The Ayurvedic and Siddha traditional Indian systems of medicine use remedies that are composed exclusively of medicinal plants and natural elements. The formulas have been scientifically laid down for centuries.

The knotted end of the sari serves as a purse.



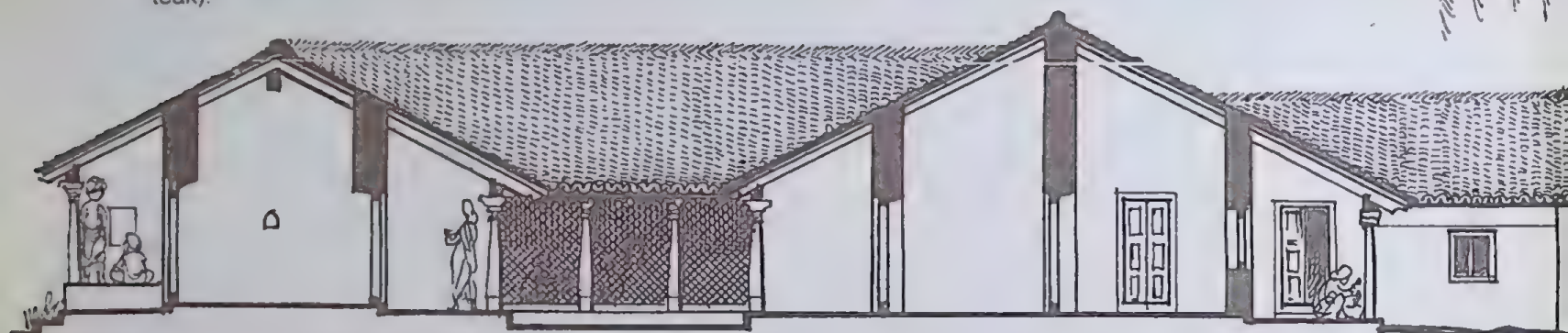
An oil and grain merchant, sitting at his cashdesk, checks his bills. These low desks are the only furniture in most shops.



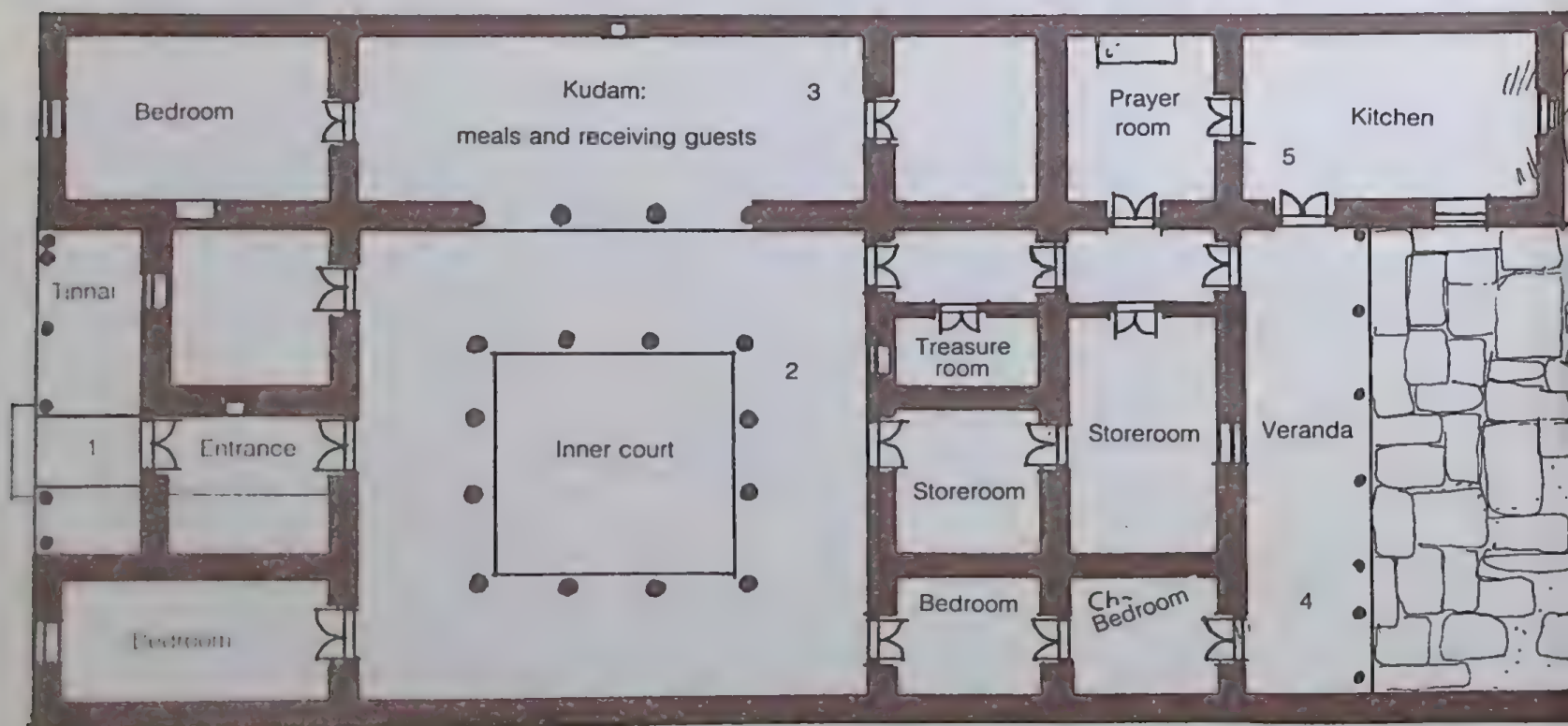


The front door is the costliest part of the facade. The frame, the lintel and both doors are made of solid wood and are finely carved. The height of the doorway never exceeds 1.65 m. On either side, a triangular niche has been made to contain an oil lamp, has been hollowed out. A garland of mango leaves wards off evil spirits.

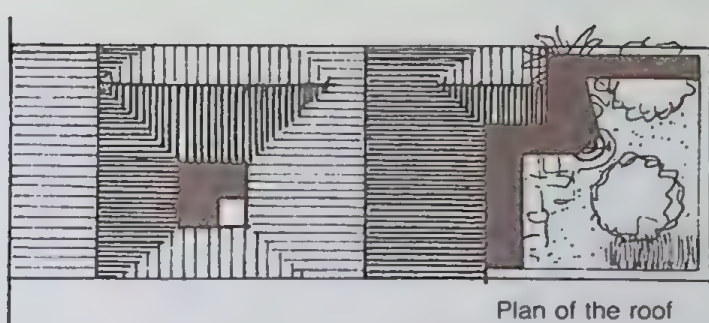
Facade on the street side.
Plastered and whitewashed brick walls.
Roof covered with semi-circular clay tiles.
Wooden pillars (most generally teak).



Cross-section of the house, from the street to the garden.



Note: the numbers refer to the standpoint of the spectator in the indoor views described on the next page.



Plan of the roof

The Tamilian House

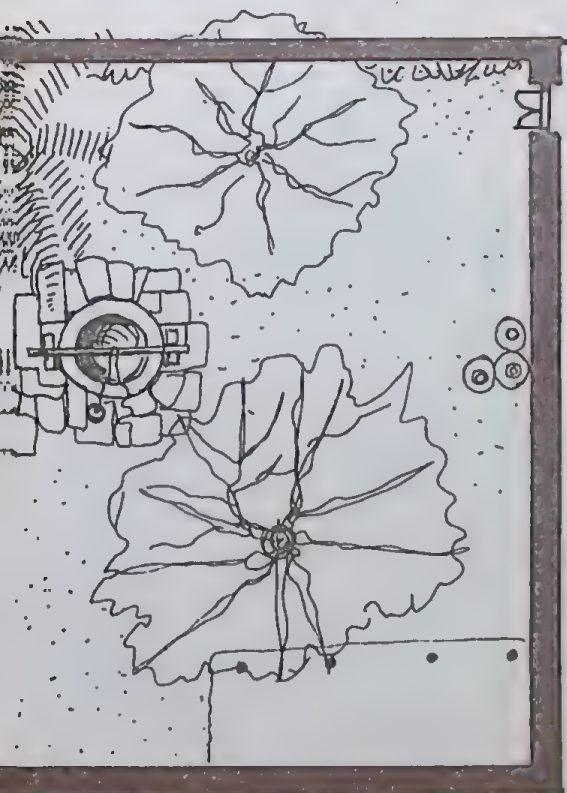
On this street, the houses are mostly joined together. Behind their rather low and narrow facade, they stretch back to the garden wall, where a gate opens out onto an alley. It is called, significantly, 'the cesspool emptiers' lane'.

Whether they are rich or poor men's houses, tiny or vast, they are always designed according to the same traditional principle, a principle which clearly reveals the lifestyle of the Tamils.

The 'tinnai' (raised platform) (1) with its beautifully-shaped timber pillars overlooks the street. It is the place for 'public life'. There, people meet and have their chats. It may often give shelter to a passer-by or receive a poor man or a stranger for the night. In the entrance room visitors may wait, seated on a broad stone bench. It is here that the travelling salesmen display their wares, offering them to the women of the house.

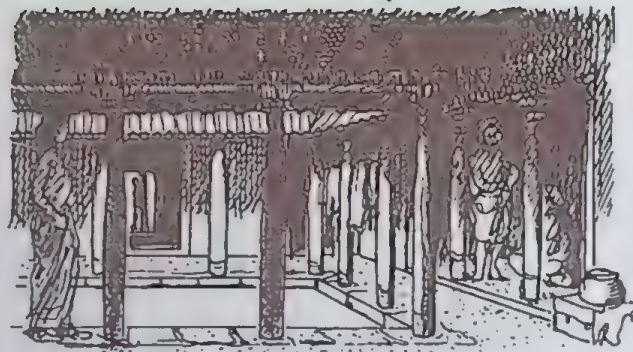
Beyond the second door, private life begins: only the members of the household and those who have been specially invited can cross its threshold. A person belonging to a lower caste than that of the family never goes beyond this point.

The small square inner court (2) is surrounded by a gallery in which the teak supporting pillars are often adorned with beautiful carved figures. On one side (3), a slightly raised space opens out, through a wide entrance, onto the gallery: there, one receives guests and has one's meals. The other rooms serve as bedrooms or store-rooms. There is a corridor leading to the kitchen (5), the back veranda (4) and the garden. In higher caste homes, there is a room reserved exclusively for puja, the daily worship that is performed to the deities venerated by the family. Privileged homes have a private well in the garden.





1. The entrance: the barber comes to people's homes and shaves his clients there. In front of the door, the mistress of the house has drawn the kolam of the day.



2. The roofless inner court creates a well of light in the middle of the house.



3. The men, served by the women, are the first to take their meals. They eat off fresh banana leaves that will be thrown away afterwards. By doing this, they avoid the possible impurity of a badly washed plate.

Inside the House

Whoever enters the house must leave his sandals, if he wears them, at the entrance. Once one has crossed the threshold, the eyes gradually get used to the ambient darkness after the intense brightness of the street. In most of the rooms daylight only penetrates through the doors. These doors, set in a row along the walls, ensure good air circulation. But, even so, the rooms are usually small and can get stuffy. Therefore, as soon as the hot weather starts in April, everybody sleeps outside either on the tinnai or under the gallery of the inner court.

There is no furniture as such in the house. During the day, the mats and blankets used for sleeping are rolled up in a corner of the bedrooms. Clothes and the family's other possessions are kept in chests, trunks and baskets. Everyday objects are kept in recesses built into the walls or on shelves. The smoothed and shiny floor of hard-packed soil is scrupulously swept and washed with a mixture of cow-dung (which has antiseptic properties) and water. This is the custom in villages as well.

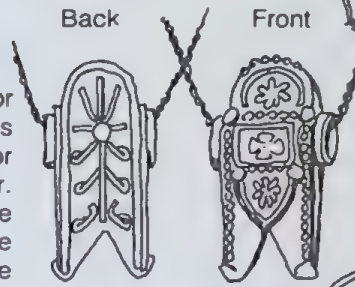
Oil lamps are used for light: these are of great importance since they are also utilized during the worship rituals performed in the house twice a day. At nightfall, the mistress of the house lights them in a ceremonial way.



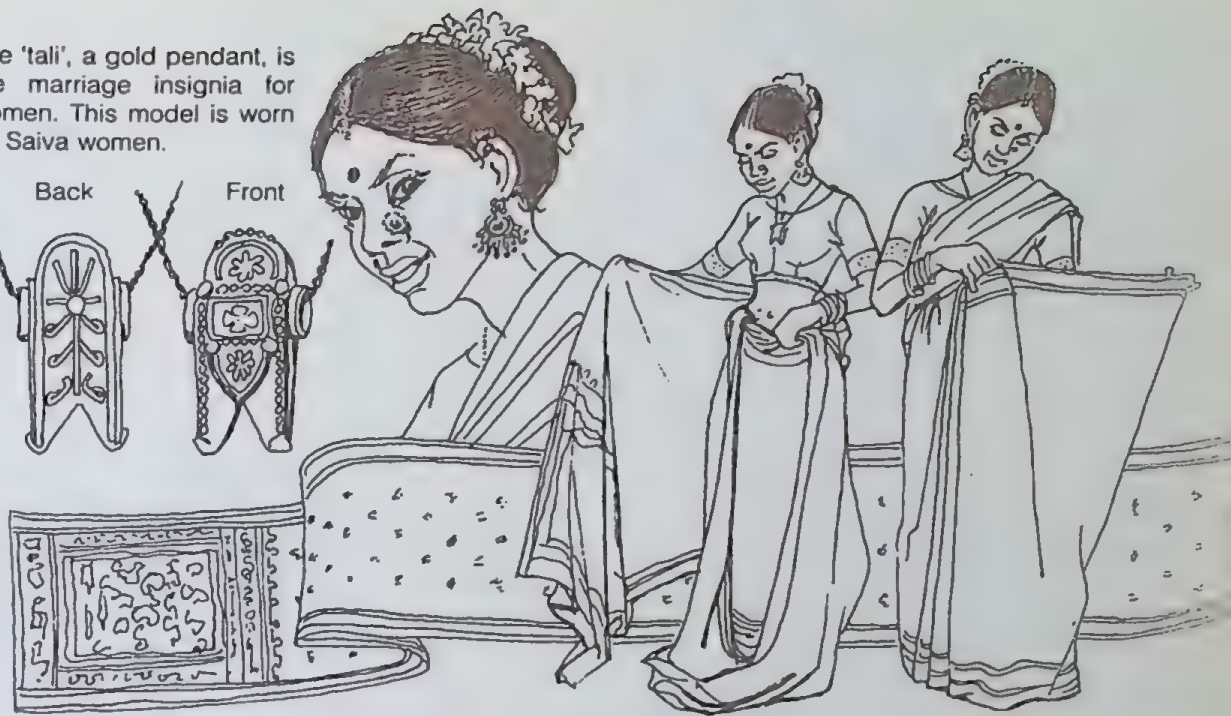
4,5. Kitchen utensils made entirely of stone: a millstone for grinding the numerous ingredients needed for the preparation of **curry** and a cereal mortar for grinding grains and preparing dough. The kitchen is the exclusive domain of the women. One of them is preparing 'dosai', a type of pancake made from rice and lentils. The stock of dried cow-dung cakes, piled up in a corner, is for fuelling the fire.



The 'tali', a gold pendant, is the marriage insignia for women. This model is worn by Saiva women.



Refreshing medicinal sandal or turmeric paste for rubbing one's body and face. Coconut oil for smoothing down one's hair. Jasmine flowers for adorning the hair. Vermillion powder for the forehead mark. Jewels that are worn full-time: earrings, nose jewels, necklaces and chains, often of gold and precious stones. These items of jewellery are the personal treasures of the woman. Ankle bracelets are made of silver. Silver toe rings are the other insignia of marriage for a woman.



The sari, which is wrapped around the body, is a strip of cotton or silk 1.20m wide, varying in length from 5m for ordinary use to 9m for special occasions. The way of

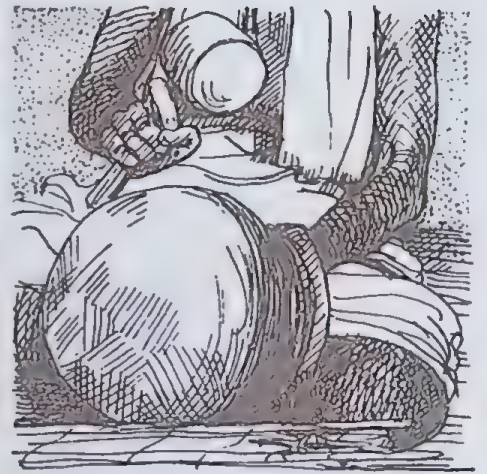
wearing it varies according to the region, the caste and the occasion. In 1845, the short blouse is only worn on special occasions by the wealthiest women.



The household is often large and the family quickly expands. The house depicted here belongs to a well-to-do tradesman living with his wife, his widowed mother, two of his sons and their wives — one of whom has two children and the other three — a daughter of marriageable age and a younger son: altogether, a family of fourteen persons with, in addition, three servants.

Traditionally, the eldest male member is the head of the family and is responsible for maintaining his family and ensuring that his children are well set in life.

The extended family arrangement suits all concerned, and each member has a place in it. Girls go to live in their husband's house and take their role in family life according to their seniority. The wife of the eldest male becomes mistress of the house and is responsible for the smooth running of the domestic life of the household. This involves not only assigning and overseeing chores, but also educating the girls — her daughters, nieces, granddaughters and daughters-in-law — to deftly and efficiently carry on the arts which will be the foundation of their own future family. The TAMILIAN family, often extended by even very remote relatives, forms a highly organized social group.



At the Potter's

Selvi and Madhavan want to buy a votive horse for an offering they will perform to Aiyandar, the patron god of the villages. They will make the offering as soon as they return to Mailam. They go to Ravi, the potter, who is renowned for the quality of his pottery work and for his skilfulness in modeling all sorts of animals and figurines.

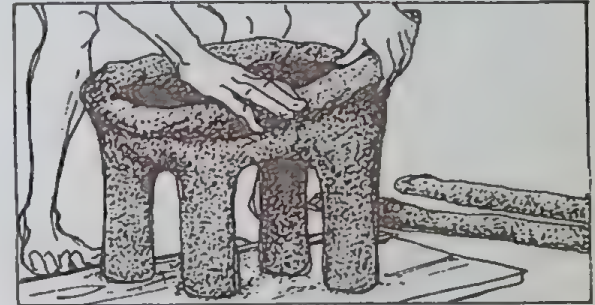
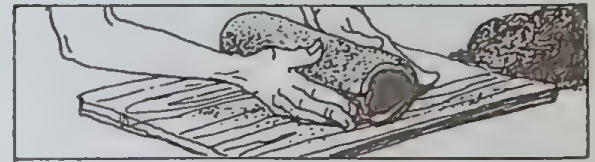
The potters belong to a class of craftsmen who are often poorer than the others. Not infrequently, they also function as **bonesetters**.

Right now, Ravi and his family have a lot of work. From morning till evening, the wheel is being spun, and the pots 'grow' under the skilful hands of the artisan. When he takes them off the wheel, a large opening is left in the base. His brother untiringly shapes and completes the spherical bottoms by stretching and pounding the still malleable clay with a wooden mallet. Dozens of finished pots are piling up, showing only their beautiful brownish-red, bulbous bottoms. Other pots are lined up in the courtyard. They are drying in the sun, waiting to be baked. December has started and Ravi has to prepare an enormous stock of pottery for the Pongal Festival, which, starting around the 15th of January, will last for four days. On this occasion, all old pots are broken. Each family will then buy at least three new ones to do the ritual

cooking of rice in milk on specially erected open-air fires. The craftsmen must know the calendar of future events for they have to work a long time in advance to meet seasonal demands. Ravi and his father also take time off to model figures and animals which they will bake together with the pots.

To make the kiln, a circular space with a diameter of 3m. is cleared in the courtyard. There, small sticks of firewood are spread out about 12cm. high and covered with a layer of cow-dung cakes. The pots and statues are then piled up on this platform of fuel to form a pyramid about 1.5m. high. All this is covered with a straw dome which is coated with clay. Small holes are made in this dome: these let in the air and let out the smoke. Finally, the combustible base is ignited. The firing will be over within a few hours. Afterwards, the figures and animals are decorated with a brush.

Selvi and Madhavan have chosen their statue . . . its eyes have not been on painted yet. In accordance with local tradition, this will not be done until the ceremony of 'opening the eyes' takes place. At that time the votive horse and rider will be consecrated in the Aiyandar shrine in Mailam.



தெள்ளிய வாலின் சிறுபழத் தொருவீதை
தெண்ணீர்க் கயத்துச் சிறுமீன் சினையினும்
நுண்ணீதே யாயினு மண்ணல் யானை
அணிதேர் புரவி யாட்பெரும் படையொடு
மன்னர்க் கிருக்க நீழலா கும்மே.

Text taken from an anthology of ethical poems which children still learn by heart today.

"Quite minute, the seed of the small banyan fruit is tinier than the egg of the little fishes in a still-water pond. Yet, [when it grows] it will provide enough shade for a king to rest together with his giant elephants, decorated chariots, cavalry and huge army of foot-soldiers."

Translated from Tamil by S. Sundaram. In the Tamil tradition, a fully-equipped king, going off to war, divides his army into four divisions: elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry.

School on the Tinnai

In a quiet street, a hawker is crying out, "Patai! Patai!" He is selling ducks which, quacking away, stick their heads out of the basket in every direction; their necks look like long supple flowers, undulating to the rhythm of the man's steps.

But soon the cries of the vendor are overpowered by the sound of many voices repeating a full-throated chant: he is passing in front of a school.

On the **tinnai** of a large house, two rows of children sit facing each other on either side of the teacher. He is leading the recitation, holding a book in one hand and a cane in the other. The pupils are reciting in unison the curriculum of Tamil verses which, in addition to teaching vocabulary, grammar and style, also impart moral principles.



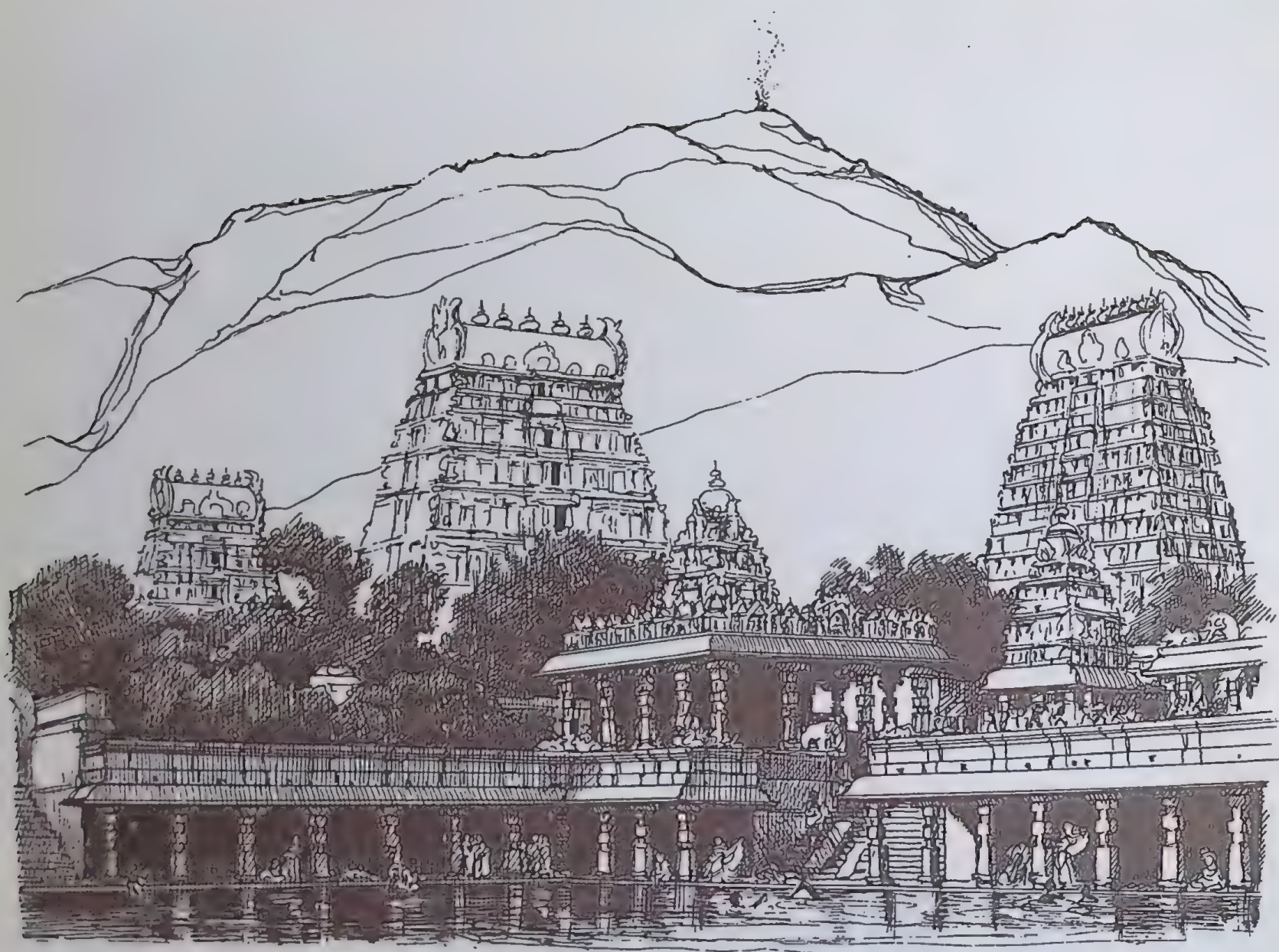


Little Madan traces the Tamil letter 'a' with full attention.



It is a small traditional school, quite different from the schools that are gradually being set up in big cities like Madras and Bombay. These new city schools follow the British model. As in many traditional schools, the teacher here is a Brahmin. From morning till evening, he teaches village boys of all ages and is often helped by an assistant. The pupils use neither textbooks nor notebooks: they learn to read and write by tracing the letters with their fingers in the fine sand that has been spread on the ground in front of them. The arithmetic lessons are sung at full volume and come after the grammar lessons. The most advanced pupils learn passages from the **Mahabharata** and the **Ramayana**. The teacher uses translations of the original Sanskrit texts and comments on them. In these small rural schools education is not given in Sanskrit, the ancient classical language of India, but in the regional language, which is equally ancient and rich. All lessons are learnt by heart, so the pupils have to be very studious and attentive. Anyone who makes a mistake, or is lazy or disobeys will be in trouble: the cane or other form of corporal punishment is always ready to assist attention. For instance, someone who makes a careless mistake in his recitation may have to rub his closed fist in the sand, thus reminding the hand to be more careful. As for a boy who moves about without permission, he may be required to remain in a complicated posture which, seen from afar, may look like a skilful gymnastic maneuver. ...He will have to stay in that position for as long as the teacher sees fit. All the pupils here are boys. Girls normally do not go to school. Only those girls who are destined to become temple dancers receive education from a specialized teacher. In 1845, when literacy is not at all required except for priests, teachers and scribes, very few children at all go to school.

In the villages and towns, the school teacher is influential and a highly regarded person. People respect him, and the pupils' parents make it a point of honour to pay him as well as they can, either in money or in kind, according to their means. Contributions of rice, spices, fruits, vegetables, fabrics and even kitchen utensils often constitute an important part of his income.



A Last Evening in the Temple

Madhavan and his family, who are a little tired from their walking and shopping in town, are coming back to the temple. It is six o'clock and getting dark. The festival is over and life in the temple has resumed its daily rhythm. Alone on the hill the fire will still burn for a few days more.

In the fifth courtyard of the temple, at the bottom of the steps of the Shivaganga Tank, devotees are performing their ablutions, chatting, resting or meditating in the cool shade of

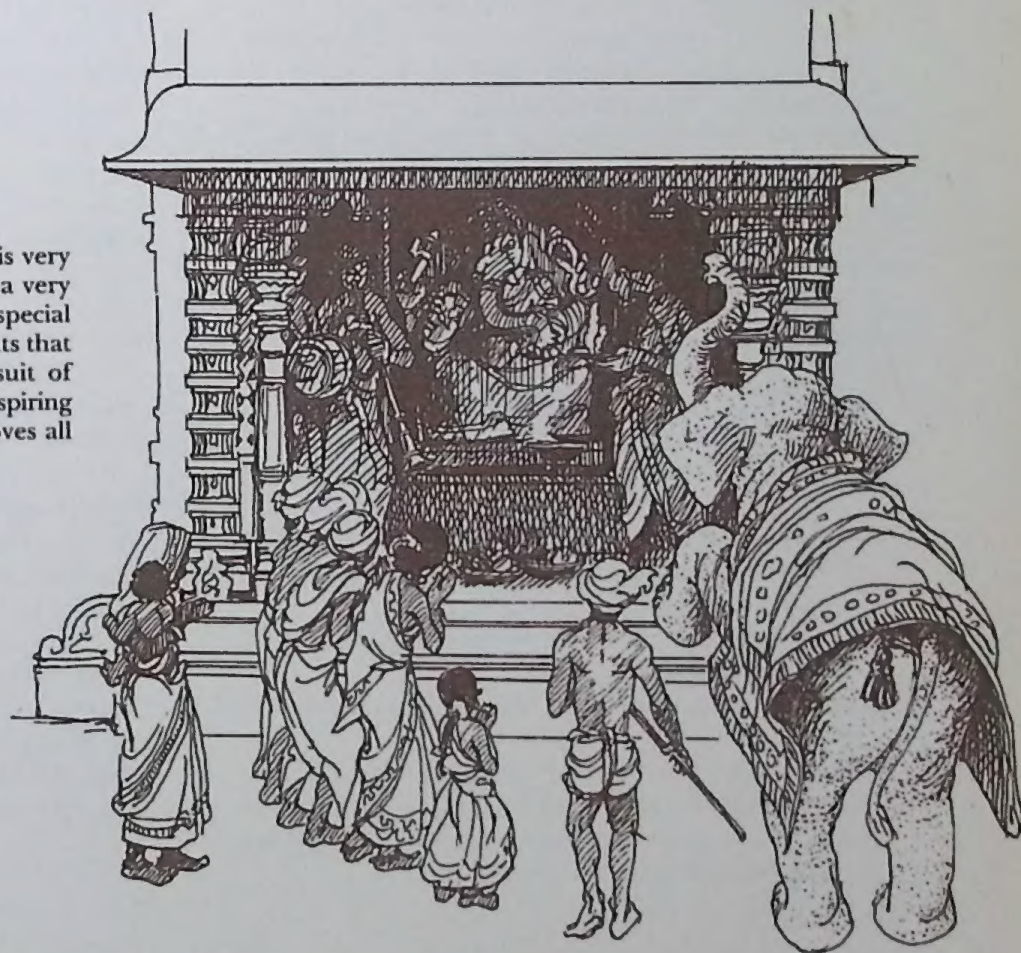
the gallery. Suddenly, they hear the drums and 'oboes' resound from the musicians accompanying the priests for the evening puja.

As on every evening at this time, the mahout takes the temple elephant in front of a shrine dedicated to Ganesh located near the entrance gopuram of the second courtyard. Standing on its hind legs, trumpeting loudly, the elephant pays homage to the elephant-headed god, 'He who removes all obstacles'. In Tamil, Ganesh is also called 'Pillaiyar', that is, 'the Noble Son'.

Madhavan and Selvi, Shanti and baby Mani, grandparents Kumaran and Sarasvati, uncle Shankaran and his wife Devi, are all going back to Mailam early tomorrow morning.

For a long, long time, the family will retain the inspiring memory of their great pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai.

In this shrine, the statue of Ganesh is very large. It is repainted twice a year in a very bright shade of orange-red. For special festivals it is decorated with ornaments that fit around its entire figure like a suit of armour, transforming it into an awe-inspiring silver emblem of the God who removes all obstacles.



GLOSSARY

Ablution: ritual bath or purification ceremony.

Alms: money, food or clothing given to religious mendicants or beggars. The giving of alms is enjoined upon all householders.

Ascetic: someone who renounces worldly life in order to devote himself exclusively to religious practices.

Betel: leaf of a type of Indian pepper plant which is chewed together with lime and areca nut.

Bonesetter: someone who treats sprains, dislocations or fractures, but who is not a doctor.

Brahmin: a member of the priestly or highest Hindu caste.

Caste: one of the hereditary classes (or professions) that make up Hindu society.

Cholas: the South Indian dynasty which ruled from the 9th until the 13th century.

Curry: mixture of savoury and hot spices used in the preparation of most South Indian dishes. By extension, these dishes are also called curry.

Devotee: a person following the religious path of devotion to a particular deity or saint.

Gandhi: Indian saint, philosopher and patriot (1869 – 1948), who was the soul of the struggle against the British for the independence of India.

Gopuram: stepped, pyramid-like tower erected over the entrances to certain Hindu temples.

Hindu: someone belonging to the Hindu religion, the main religion of India.

Indian: any inhabitant of India, whatever his religion may be.

Kartikai: in India, a month of the lunar year, the period of which extends from mid-November to mid-December.

Mahabharata: one of the two great classical epics of Hindu literature.

Mahout: a man who trains, rides and looks after an elephant.

Monsoon: the tropical rainy season; a wind, blowing alternately from the sea towards the continent and from the continent to the sea, causing the succession of wet and dry seasons.

Palanquin: a litter or carriage carried on men's shoulders.

Pipal Tree: *Ficus religiosa*, a sacred tree in all Eastern Asia.

Pongal: in South India, the festival of annual renewal, celebrated around January 15th.

Ramayana: the second great classical epic of Hindu literature.

Rupee: monetary unit of all India since the British colonization.

Sacrifice: offering made to a deity during a religious ceremony.

Sandal: an Asian tree whose highly-scented wood is used for incense and other religious purposes, as well as carvings and various cosmetic and body-care products.

Shaiva: someone belonging to the Hindu religion who worships Lord Shiva above all other Gods.

Shrine: protected spot or construction containing a representation of God worshipped there.

Stucco: coating, generally made of pulverized marble, quick lime and chalk, used in architecture for decorative purposes.

Tamil Nadu: State located in South-east India. Its inhabitants are predominantly Tamils. Its capital is Madras.

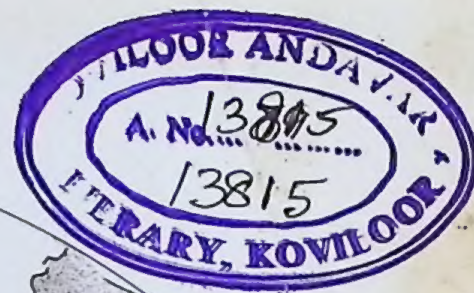
Teak: tropical Asian tree supplying light timber that does not rot. It is used for naval construction, architecture and furniture.

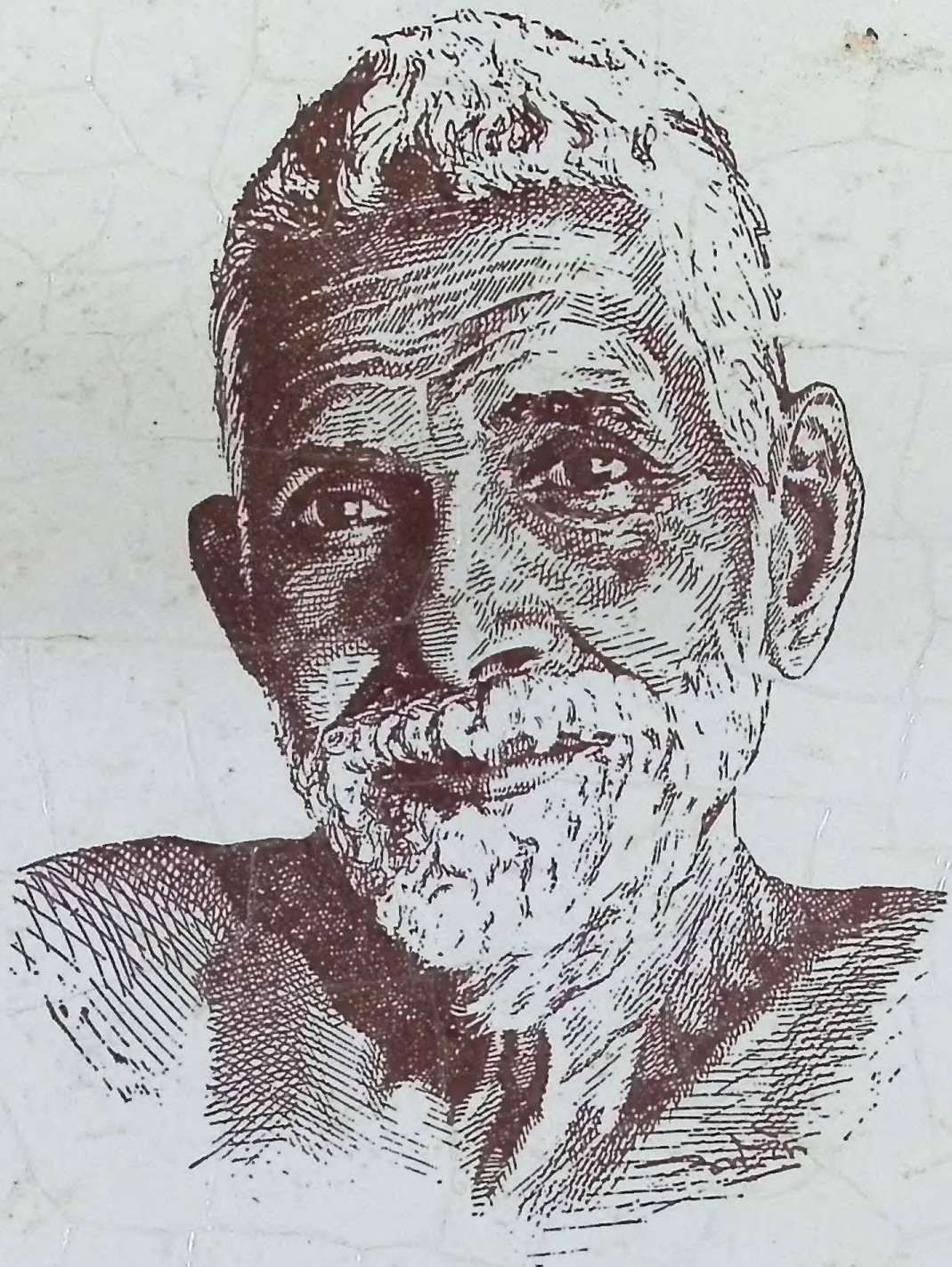
Tinnai: any raised platform, particularly the front veranda of a house.

Untouchables: 'outcastes'. The segment of Hindu society whose members do not belong to any of the four main castes, and who are regarded by others as being impure.

Vaishnava: someone belonging to the Hindu religion who worships Lord Vishnu above all other Gods.

Vetiver: a plant that is grown in India and the West Indies. The stalks are used for covering roofs and the roots for making perfume.





The South Indian town of Tiruvannamalai, in recent times associated with the great sage Ramana Maharshi, has, for more than a thousand years, been a major pilgrimage centre for devotees of Siva, one of the principal Hindu deities. Its major festival, occurring between mid-November and mid-December, attracts hundreds of thousands of devotees. In this charming and beautifully-illustrated account, Françoise Boudignon describes the main components of the festival along with the beliefs that underlie them. The story unfolds through the eyes of a family of peasants who journey from their village to attend the ten-day event. A wide spectrum of Hindu customs, practices and beliefs unfold as the family explores the wonders and the traditions of their ancient culture.